



## **Disaster in Crisis**

### **Social Reproduction Struggles during the Long American Downturn**

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# *DISASTER IN CRISIS*

Social Reproduction Struggles during the Long American  
Downturn

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## Abstract:

Since the inception of disaster studies in academia after WWII, two kinds of actors have been distinguished as involved in disasters. On the one hand, disasters involve *formal actors*, such as professional aid workers employed by state-run relief agencies; on the other hand, disasters involve *informal actors*, including disaster victims, bystanders and volunteers. While in the immediate post-war years the role of the expert in disaster mitigation was valorised, since the 1970s there has been a shift in emphasis toward a more horizontal type of disaster relief that champions grassroots initiatives and bottom-up organising as the preferred method to combat disaster. Once construed as strictly a responsibility of the state, the mitigation and management of disasters has shifted since the 1970s into a matter for civil society: a shift which has been heralded as progressive, democratic and inclusive by existing disaster research.

In the following, I argue that this perspective that valorises the participation of actors from civil society in the fight against disasters fails to grasp the systematic reconfiguration of social life that has taken place in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century *under the banner of disaster*. Focussing on the modifications to disaster management in the United States between 1970 and 2012, I show how the inclusion of civil society in the provision of aid services was accompanied by a structural withdrawal of the state from disaster relief and other welfare services. I contextualise this withdrawal in the US government's general turn to austerity in response to the economic crisis of the 1970s. My account couples the notion of *disaster* with that of *economic crisis* on the one hand and *structural violence* on the other to examine disasters as a specific problem for social reproduction. Disaster thus becomes a lens through which to study the changing roles of the state and civil society in the overall management of social reproduction.

Mapping the changes in the disaster sector onto the *Long American Downturn* between 1970 and 2012, I trace the following double-movement that has affected the spheres of the state and civil society in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the state level, I examine a movement of inclusion, in which formerly specialist authority on disasters is relinquished and the vernacular skills and capacities of the people are drawn on during emergencies. On the level of civil society, I show how this inclusion is complicated by a real movement of social exclusion, indexed by the increasingly harsh US austerity politics and the exponentially rising unemployment since the 1970s, that raises the number of surplus populations to staggering dimensions. This development informs my hypothesis regarding emergencies today: *During the Long American crisis since the 1970s, disasters have served as occasions that absorb the reproductive labour of surplus populations as unwaged inputs, legitimising the U.S. state's cutback on social spending*. I discuss this dynamic in relation to three distinct case studies that travel from California over Chicago to New York to study the patterns of struggle and contestation that communities develop when faced with disasters.

## Resumé:

Siden deres fremkomst i tiden efter Anden Verdenskrig har katastrofestudier skelnet mellem to aktører, formelle aktører, der først og fremmest er nødhjælpsarbejdere, og uformelle aktører, der inkluderer katastrofeofrene, men også frivillige, der hjælper til i nødhjælpsarbejdet. Den umiddelbare efterkrigstid var kendetegnet ved en valorisering af den ekspertviden, der skulle udbedre skaderne fra katastrofer, siden 1970'erne er der imidlertid sket et skifte hen imod en mere horisontal form for katastrofehjælp. Efter det såkaldte *vulnerability turn* er katastrofestudierne begyndt at promovere græsrodsinitiativer og bottom-up organisering. Hvor det tidligere var statens gebet at øve katastrofehjælp, så er det siden 1970'erne i stadig stigende grad blevet civilsamfundets opgave at gribe ind og rydde op efter katastrofer. Dette skifte er blevet udlagt som en demokratisering af den eksisterende katastrofeforskning.

I nærværende afhandling viser jeg, at denne analyse, der privilegerer civilsamfundets deltagelse i kampen mod katastrofer, overser den systemiske transformation, der har fundet sted i de sidste årtier af det 20. århundrede. Gennem en analyse af de ændringer, der har fundet sted med katastrofehandtering i USA mellem 1970 og 2012 viser jeg, hvorledes det ovennævnte skifte, hvor der skrues op for civilsamfundets rolle, ledsages af en strukturel tilbagetrækning af staten fra katastrofehjælp og andre velfærdsydelser. Jeg kontekstualiserer denne tilbagetrækning som den amerikanske stats sparepolitik konfronteret med den økonomiske krise i begyndelsen af 1970'erne. Min analyse forbinder således katastrofebegrebet med på den ene side den økonomiske krise og på den anden side strukturel vold, hvorved det bliver muligt at undersøge katastrofer som et spørgsmål om reproduktion. Katastrofer bliver således en prisme, hvormed man kan analysere statens og civilsamfundets ændrede roller i den sociale reproduktionsproces.

Ved at redegøre for de ændringer, der har fundet sted i katastrofe-sektoren på tværs af 'den lange amerikanske nedgang' mellem 1970 og 2012, kortlægger jeg den dobbelte bevægelse, der har påvirket stat og civilsamfund i den anden halvdel af det 20. århundrede, hvor der dels er sket en uddelegering af opgaver til 'almindelige' mennesker, og dels har fundet en omfattende social eksklusion sted, som kommer til udtryk i stigende arbejdsløshed og en voksende mængde indsatte. Dette har resulteret i skabelsen af en egentlig overskudsbefolkning. Denne udvikling er baggrunden for afhandlingens tese: I løbet af den lange amerikanske krise har katastrofer paradoksalt nok legitimeret den førte sparepolitik, idet overskudsbefolkningens reproduktive arbejde er blevet inkluderet som 'gratis' kapital. Jeg diskuterer denne dynamik med udgangspunkt i tre specifikke case studier: Californien i 1970'erne, Chicago i 1990'erne og New York i 00'erne.

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# I Introduction: Death by Class

*Whiteness is the privilege to observe the particular and not experience the structural.*

– Facebook post by the art duo Dark Matter, December 21, 2015

## 1 The Corpse in the Street

On September 11<sup>th</sup> 2005, two weeks after Hurricane Katrina inundated New Orleans, killing at least 1,245 people <sup>1</sup> and destroying much of the city infrastructure, the news network *Democracy Now* uncovered a scandal that aggravated New Orleanseans well beyond the immediate impact of the hurricane: the scandal of dead bodies, rotting in the street. In a *Democracy Now* broadcast, the anchor Amy Goodman interviews Malik Rahim, resident of the neighbourhood of Algiers and founder of the Common Ground network, engaged in the reconstruction of New Orleans. For days, Rahim had been asking city authorities, from the police to the army to the National Guard, to remove an unidentified dead body from the roadside. “The kids pass by and they’re seeing it”, says Rahim, and he continues:

His body been here for almost two weeks. Two weeks tomorrow [...] that this man’s body been laying here. And there’s no reason for it. Look where we at? I mean, it’s not flooded. There’s no reason for them to be—left that body right here like this [...] Every day, we ask them about coming and pick it up. And they refuse to come and pick it up. And you could see, it’s literally

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<sup>1</sup> The actual number of victims during Hurricane Katrina is a contested issue. This is mostly due to the large number of agencies from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Department of Health in Louisiana that compiled their own data in the aftermath of the disaster. Although 1,833 is an often-cited number of overall deaths from the hurricane, none of the above agencies has actually endorsed it. For a statistical overview, see <http://www.datacenterresearch.org/data-resources/katrina/facts-for-impact/> (Accessed on 28.12.2014)



decomposing right here. Right out in the sun. Every day we sit up and we ask them about it. Because, I mean, this is close as you could get to tropical climate in America. And they won't do anything with it.<sup>2</sup>

With Algiers being one of the most heavily policed areas of New Orleans, all city authorities drive by the dead body, as if on command. When confronted by Goodman and her drawn camera, they admit knowing about the body but deny any responsibility in removing it from the site. The Algiers corpse was no isolated case. It later emerged that the retrieval of dead bodies only started in earnest on September 9<sup>th</sup>, a good ten days after Katrina struck New Orleans. With elderly people of colour in the African-American neighbourhoods of the Lower Ninth Ward and Lakeview constituting the vast majority of disaster victims, black residents were left to reckon with the wreckage with the smell of their decomposing neighbours infesting the tropical air.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the rotting bodies represented an oversight in analyses that tried to make sense of the disastrous events. While critical accounts focused on how pre-existing social injustices made African-American New Orleanseans disproportionately vulnerable to hurricane damage (Laska and Morrow, 2006, Tierney, 2006, Brunsma, 2010), on how the federal rescue operations were influenced by racial prejudice (Tierney, Bevc et al., 2006, Russill and Lavin, 2011) or on how the reconstruction process was outsourced to profit-driven commercial operators (Klein, 2007, Adams, 2012, Adams, 2013), a thorough analysis of disaster relief as a question of who clears out the dead remained conspicuously absent. The following PhD thesis is dedicated to this question. Filling the analytical gap that was left behind when the waters retreated, it frames disaster aid primarily as a problem for *social reproduction*, understood as the way in

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<sup>2</sup> 'If You are Poor, It's Like the Hurricane Just Happened: Malik Rahim on Katrina 10 Years After', Democracy Now News broadcast, August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015.  
[http://www.democracynow.org/2015/8/27/if\\_you\\_are\\_poor\\_its\\_like](http://www.democracynow.org/2015/8/27/if_you_are_poor_its_like), Minute 49.02 (Accessed on 15.01.2016)

which communities reconstitute themselves on a daily basis. In this view, disaster relief becomes a form of *reproductive labour*, akin to childcare, elder care or grave digging, and indeed often involving all of the above. When seen in the light of social reproduction, disasters pose the question of who performs these elemental tasks. This question touches the fundamental distinction between the state<sup>3</sup> and civil society, therefore challenging political life as we know it.

While there have been incisive accounts of *disaster capitalism* (Klein, 2007, Loewenstein, 2017) and the ways in which disaster situations are used to advance the business interests of political and financial elites, a thorough theorisation of relief work as a form of reproductive labour is today still missing. Little has been written on the structural transformations of the disaster sector, including the changing roles of the state and civil society when confronted with disasters. Instead, from the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake to Hurricane Katrina, from 9/11 to the 2010 Haitian Earthquake, the fragment most often picked out from a disaster is the cataclysmic, disruptive event. From the metaphysical investigations of the Lisbon rubble to today's elaborate contingency planning, disaster is commonly framed as an exceptional "moment of interruption and novelty" (Aradau and Munster, 2011: 10) that ruptures an otherwise normal state of affairs.

However, the corpses in the New Orleans streets alert us to a different dimension of disaster. They highlight disasters' *longue durée*, epitomised by the dead body that simply remains, rotting and ignored by the state. They alert us to structural issues of poverty and racism that create the conditions in which certain communities will be lastingly affected by disaster, as well as made materially responsible for managing their misfortune. From this standpoint, the African American disaster victims rotting in the sun represent instances of 'death by class' and 'death by race', rather than the officially certified 'death by hurricane'. The

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<sup>3</sup> In the following, I use 'state' as a theoretical term to designate the state form, i.e. the federal state, rather than individual administrative states within the federal ensemble

difference between these views is neatly summed up by the character Creighton Bernette in the pilot episode of David Simon's HBO series *Treme*: "What hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast was a natural disaster, a hurricane pure and simple. The flooding of New Orleans was a man-made catastrophe, a federal fuck-up of epic proportions."<sup>4</sup>

In the following, I seek to illuminate the underlying dynamics of this federal 'fuck-up'. I argue that rather than being an exception, the handling of disaster victims by neighbours and relatives during Hurricane Katrina is exemplary of a wider trend in contemporary American disaster management. In America today, disaster relief is increasingly shouldered by civil society to make up for the reluctance of the state to deliver this essential service. I seek to show how the reshuffling of disaster relief from the sphere of the federal state to that of civil society unfolded as a crucial response to the economic crisis of the 1970s. Concretely, I demonstrate how after progressively becoming more involved in disaster aid since its first intervention to rebuild the destroyed Portsmouth, New Hampshire, after a fire in 1803 (Farber and Chen, 2006: 102),<sup>5</sup> the federal government has since the economic crisis of the 1970s steadily withdrawn from the provision of disaster aid, as well as other social reproductive services in an attempt to lower the state deficit.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Isak Winkel Holm for pointing me to this quote. See Holm, I. W. (2012). *The Cultural Analysis of Disaster*. C. Meiner and K. Veel. Berlin, Germany, de Gruyter: 15-32.

<sup>5</sup> From 1803 to 1950, the federal government provided relief in over 100 disaster situations, becoming a primary actor to administer aid during emergencies. While my historical focus on crisis begins in the 1970s, I present a brief historiography and interpretation of the federal involvement of the 1930s and 1960s in chapter III.

<sup>6</sup> The Federal Emergency Management Agency FEMA was founded in 1979 by President Jimmy Carter to take over the duties of the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration. Before the 1970s, federal involvement in disasters had been de-centralised with over one hundred different agencies operating at different levels of disaster relief. While underfunded from the beginning, FEMA operated with varying levels of federal funding until George W. Bush took over the presidency in 2001. Creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Bush administration integrates FEMA into a sub-branch of Homeland Security. Since then FEMA has lost its autonomous status as an independent agency. Since 2003, funding has dwindled consistently as well as becoming difficult to trace due to its integration into DHS. Crucially, the Obama administration has not reversed but only further exacerbated this trend. From 2016 to 2017, the FEMA budget was thus cut by a total of USD 582 million. For a brief history of FEMA, see <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/storm/etc/femahist.html>

Coextensive with this federal withdrawal, scientific studies of disaster began to flaunt the emergent and self-organising potential of civil society to become resilient to disasters and survive alone and without the state during emergencies (Hilhorst, 2004, Wisner, Gaillard et al., 2012, Kelman, Burns et al., 2015). My thesis challenges the current state of disaster research by arguing that most disaster studies have ignored the crucial economic dimension of the *resilience turn*. I maintain that the consequence of this omission is that the interdisciplinary field fails to grasp the systematic reconfiguration of social life that has taken place in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century *under the banner of disaster*. I contend that developing such an account requires coupling the notion of disaster with that of economic *crisis* on the one hand, and the temporally distributed forms of *structural* or *objective violence* on the other. This allows us to see disasters as a distinct problem for social reproduction, and study the patterns of adaptation and contestation that communities develop, when faced with emergencies.

Focusing on the *Short American Century* between 1970 and 2012, I develop a historical and theoretical account that maps the transformations of disaster relief onto the coextensive economic crisis through three paradigmatic case studies. Examining the integration of civil society into disaster relief from Oakland in 1970 over Chicago in 1995 to New York in 2012, I argue that the US government reacted to the decline in its productive power by resolutely scaling back social spending in all areas from education to disaster relief, creating a situation of *generalised non-reproduction* (Goldner, 2007) or austerity,<sup>7</sup> in which diverse forms of reproductive labour increasingly have to be carried out by the people themselves. After decades of steadily growing investment into federal disaster aid, and despite a

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For current budget statistics, see

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2017/assets/ccs.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Austerity emerged in the United Kingdom during WWII to justify the rationing of food following a wartime logic of necessity, rather than choice. As such, it was laden with the moral injunction that patriotic citizens should accept the state's rationing for the benefit of the greater good and the nation. For a history of austerity internationally and in the US, see Blyth, M. (2013). *Austerity: the history of a dangerous idea*. Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press.

strong increase in natural and man-made disasters, the state sector is today increasingly withdrawing from the provision of relief services. Thus, during the 2012 U.S presidential election, voters could choose between a 3% cut to the FEMA budget, proposed by the Obama camp and a 40% cut, anticipated by the Romney camp.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the strong disparity between these two options, it was clear that only seven years after Hurricane Katrina, the federal disaster budget would be significantly cut by either party. As with other cuts to public spending, the hole left behind by the axing of state budgets has been filled by private investors, seeking to capitalise on insurances and immediate disaster aid (disaster capitalism), as well as by unpaid members from civil society, who perform formerly state-run services out of goodwill and free of charge.

We are thus confronted with the following double-movement<sup>9</sup> relative to the spheres of the state and civil society. On the state level, a movement of inclusion, in which formerly specialist authority on disasters is relinquished and the vernacular skills and capacities of the people are drawn on during calamities. This creates a levelling where everyone from neighbours to the so-called *digital humanitarians*<sup>10</sup> can become an aid worker. On the other hand, the economic crisis of the 1970s created a real movement of social exclusion on the level of civil society, indexed by cuts to social spending and the exponentially rising unemployment that raises the number of so-called surplus populations,<sup>11</sup> those permanently excluded from wage labour,

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<sup>8</sup> See Khimm, S. (2012). "Obama cuts FEMA funding by 3 percent. Romney-Ryan cuts it by 40 percent. Or more. Or less." Retrieved 10.03.2016, 2016, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2012/10/30/obama-cuts-fema-funding-by-3-percent-romney-ryan-cuts-it-by-40-percent-or-more-or-less/>.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Polanyi coined the term double-movement to refer to a simultaneous process of marketisation on the one hand and social inclusion on the other. For Polanyi, capitalist markets under laissez-faire capitalism were increasingly pushing to deregulate the economy through the commodification of formerly non-commodified aspects of life. In turn, a movement emerges that seeks to protect society from the vagaries of the market. Polanyi's observation is insightful in that it subsumes both marketisation as well as pro-social policies under one and the same economic process. See Polanyi, K. (2001). The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time. Boston, Mass., Beacon Press.

<sup>10</sup> The so-called Digital Humanitarians are activists who use social media and big data to coordinate their relief efforts. For an introduction, see Meier, P. (2015). Digital Humanitarians: How Big Data Is Changing the Face of Humanitarian Response. Boca Raton, FL, CRC Press.

<sup>11</sup> Marx introduces the term surplus population in chapter 25 of Capital I to describe the process in which the process of advanced capitalist accumulation produces a growing number of workers that will be

to staggering dimensions. The inclusion on the level of participatory policies is thus undergirded by a growing and profound exclusion of people from the basic process of social reproduction. As the Endnotes collective, a research group that has systematically analysed contemporary changes to social reproduction put it, “this surplus population need not find itself completely outside capitalist social relations. Capital may not need these workers, but they still need to work” (2010: 30). Let me reformulate this development as a hypothesis regarding emergencies today: *In the long crisis since the 1970s, disasters have served as occasions that absorb the reproductive labour of surplus populations as unwaged inputs, allowing the US state to cut back on social spending.*

## 1.1 Disaster as a Crisis of Reproduction

When crossing the narrow bridge on St. Claude Avenue that connects the heavily gentrified Bywater area with the Lower Ninth Ward, the sensation is one of travelling in time. While slightly further upstream on the Mississippi, towards the Old Town and the French Quarter, package tourists mingle with hipsters who have moved to the Bywater from Brooklyn for the low rent, the Lower Ninth Ward appears almost depopulated. Going north on Flood St, away from the levee that delimits the Mississippi, approximately every second house is boarded up and abandoned. Interspersed in between are stubborn residents who have returned to their destroyed neighbourhood. They appear at once lonely and defiant, like the last people on Earth. Further on, the houses gradually become increasingly sparse and empty lots take over until the built environment stops entirely. From then on, it's just acres and acres of wilderness. In the area worst hit by Hurricane Katrina,

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redundant to that process of accumulation. Due to the rationalisation and automation of production, less and less workers will be needed in the production process. Marx describes this as an absolute general law of capitalist accumulation. For a contemporary discussion of the law-like character of this surplus production, see Benanav, A. and J. Clegg (2014). Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital. *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*. A. Pendakis, J. Diamanti, N. Brown, J. Robinson and I. Szeman. New York; London, Bloomsbury Academic: 586-608.

literally every house was washed away as the dilapidated levee system failed and the water of Lake Pontchartrain inundated the low-lying parts of the city.

Even before Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward and neighbouring St. Bernard Parish were regularly flooded. Naturally vulnerable to flooding due to its low-lying position, this area has been made more vulnerable through the construction of a canal network that was meant to facilitate shipping on the Mississippi but eradicated much of the swamp and marshland that served as natural flood protection. On the way back onto higher ground, one passes rows of IKEA-style houses that look like prefabs from an architecture catalogue. They are in stark contrast to the modest wooden houses we've seen before, which is not surprising since Brad Pitt's *Make It Right Foundation* built them. The intention was to provide affordable, ecological and energy-friendly housing for residents who have lost their homes. The houses go for three times the price of a normal Lower Ninth Ward house, which explains why only one third of them have been sold.

In the cartography of contemporary disaster politics, the Lower Ninth Ward is a complex nodal point, connecting contempt for the poor with environmental violence, structural racism and the capitalism of reconstruction. Despite its complexity, we can see that at the very basic level, Katrina represents a problem for social reproduction, defined as the ability of people to reproduce their lives and livelihoods on a daily basis. It is curious that, while constantly addressing reproductive issues, disaster studies has so far not produced a *systematic* account of how disasters affect social reproduction on a structural level. As the historian Ted Steinberg remarks: "There is much to be learned [...] by studying the history of natural disasters from the vantage point of political economy, especially given how little serious attention has been devoted to the topic" (2000: xvi).

Traditionally, research into disasters and disaster interventions focus on two categories of actors: large-scale and formal actors, such as humanitarian

organisations, state and supra state institutions on the one hand, and individuals in and around the disaster area, defined either as victims or first responders, on the other. This division matches the classical division of social life into a public sphere, occupied by the state, the media and individuals defined as citizens and a private sphere, occupied by individuals as their informal, private selves.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in the U.S, the history of federal disaster relief to this day can be narrated as the on-going negotiation of the fraught division between the public and the private (Moss, 1999). The urgency to develop a social reproduction approach to disasters arises out of the changes to this established division that began in the 1970s.

## 1.2 The Long Crisis

Since the 1970s, the economic crisis has dramatically altered the way in which natural disasters coincide with fundamental changes in social and governmental responsibility, creating the necessity of a new historical periodisation in disaster studies that my project seeks to undertake. This necessitates a detour through economic theory to sketch the specific parameters of the crisis before we turn to the methodology that addressing it requires.

According to Giovanni Arrighi, great historian of capitalist crisis, the two main sequences of global capitalism, the British 19<sup>th</sup> century and the American 20<sup>th</sup> century follow a similar, circular pattern of growth and decay. Beginning with a period of capitalist expansion “of the entire world economy” (1994: 219-220),

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<sup>12</sup> While the distinction between public sphere and private sphere can be narrated in different ways, many scholars have traced its origin to legal and political transformations in the 16th and 17th centuries. With the rise of the nation state, and conceptions of national sovereignty, there arose a necessity to think of the state as the guarantor of a particularly public realm. See Horwitz, M. J. (1982). "The history of the public/private distinction." *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* **130**(6): 1423-1428.. However, Jürgen Habermas has argued for a history and theory of the public as distinctly separate from the state. See Habermas, J. r. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press.. While I agree that the public is not reducible to the state, I suggest a less schematic division of social spheres according to their role in overall social reproduction.



carried by manufacture and industrial capital, the markets gradually become saturated, spurring the expansion of finance capital to compensate for the slowdown of production through the increased trading and circulation of goods. Historically, the accumulation of finance capital has spurred a new cycle of investment into production, thereby resetting and restarting the cycle again from the beginning. After the expansion of production through the war economies of the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, we are today in a cycle of trade and circulation, indexed by the take-off of the FIRE (finance, insurance and real estate) sectors since the 1970s. However, economists today have started to doubt that the productive economy can thereby be rekindled and globally diminishing profit rates in industry testify to this trend. The talk is thus of a new and potentially terminal crisis.

Despite differences in the causal chains summoned to explain the contemporary crisis, economists agree that the early 1970s, specifically the year 1973 is the moment when the boom that characterised the period after WWII suddenly comes to an end. In the words of political theorist Joshua Clover:

The year 1973 sees the first in a series of oil shocks, the formal withdrawal of the U.S. from its Southeast Asian adventure, and the final collapse of the Bretton Woods monetary system setting the stage for increasing trade and current account imbalances; concomitant with these is a global downturn of markets (2016: 130-131).

Clover's diagnosis as well as his historical periodisation are based on Robert Brenner's influential account of the 'long downturn'. For Brenner, the 1970s come to stand for a profound crisis in U.S. manufacture, in which Japanese and West German competitors challenge American hegemony by boosting production and driving down prices. Unable to reduce their productive capacity, American companies struggle to compete for market share, leading to "overcapacity and

overproduction in manufacturing on an international scale” (Brenner, 2006: 38). What are the immediate results of this crisis? For the economist David McNally (2009), the favoured tool in the capitalist attempt to resolve the crisis in overproduction is *financialisation*, or the growth of financial tools and instruments, sold as bets on future gains. The 1971 delinking of the dollar from the gold standard opened the door to a diverse array of financial products such as derivatives or credit default swaps that all speculate on anticipated future profits. The net result is an increasingly volatile economic environment, whose explosiveness was dramatically experienced in the 2008 credit bubble. For McNally, financialisation presents a shift from real productive industries to increasingly *fictitious capitals* that culminate in factory closures, mass worker redundancies and layoffs across the globe.

It is thus workers who pay the price of this large-scale economic restructuring. This happens primarily through the mass unemployment that has befallen Western societies since the beginning of deindustrialisation in the 1960s. Since *fictitious capitals* need very little labour to function, the price of labour has been devalued at the same time as what Marx called the *reserve army of labour*, a growing surplus of workers who can be drafted in and out of employment at wish, has taken unprecedented dimensions. This is what the economist Loren Goldner captures when he speaks of a situation of *generalised non-reproduction*, meaning wages so low as to prevent the production of a new generation of workers (Goldner, 2007). Goldner concludes that we have entered a period of capitalist *self-cannibalisation*, since the investment into fictitious capital enables an enormous divestment of the means of basic social reproduction, resulting in mass unemployment, the concomitant increase in private debt, the privatisation of education and health care and a public infrastructure left to rot. The flipside of finance capital’s fantastic speculative power is thus a situation of real social non-reproduction and the exploitation of entire populations, deemed superfluous and excluded from waged work. While capitalism has historically always been driven by crises, for Joshua

Clover, “the current period is distinguished from similar passages in previous cycles to the extent that recoveries of the sort seen previously remain from our vantage point invisible” (2016: 130).

We can see that the form that structural violence takes in times of austerity is a renewed pressure on the domain of social reproduction, including welfare services, education, health care and disaster relief. The necessity of a social reproduction approach to disasters thus arises directly out of the reality of a long crisis in capitalism that started in the 1970s and shows no signs of abating. The current moment presents us with a new and unprecedented pressure on a growing number of workers, while at the same time shifting the political arena from productive waged work (the characteristic domain of the 19<sup>th</sup> century workers’ movement) to the unwaged reproductive activities that have been side-lined by the labour movement. Hence the urgency and necessity to study those historical movements that have widened our political vocabulary by placing the *reproductive* activities of education, medical care and childcare at the head of the political agenda next to the *productive* work that happens for a wage. The advantage of this perspective, which looks at *social reproduction* as the way in which bodies and minds are replenished under capitalism, is that it takes a specific labour-approach to social action, in which activities as diverse as child care and food provision are seen as distinct areas of work that are necessary for the workforce to be reconstituted, and whose chores are unequally distributed across the population. It thus allows a materialist analysis of the forms of care work that are normally passed off as acts of altruism or goodwill. A brief excursus into social reproduction theory will outline the methodology that informs the following case studies.

### 1.3 On Method: Social Reproduction Theory

Social reproduction theory emerged from within strands of Marxist social science in the 1960s and 70s. It sought to understand why the post-war climate of relative growth and prosperity in the West failed to increase social equality and still reproduced hugely unequal class relations. Breaking with the orthodox Marxist insistence on industrial production, social reproduction theory put *reproduction* first and insisted that the primary goal of class societies was not the direct production of commodities for profit but rather the reproduction of their own conditions of production, including the labour force and the class relation. Two domains were theorised as particularly important for this process; educational work, reproducing class identity by creating gradations of cultural capital, and care work, directly working on the bodily replenishment of workers. While Pierre Bourdieu's work focussed on the role of the educational system in the acquisition and maintenance of cultural capital in the hands of the upper and middle classes (Bourdieu, 1977), Marxist Feminism extended the reproductive gaze to the historical role of women in the reproduction of labour power through housework, the care for non-workers like children or the elderly, and the production of fresh workers through childbirth (Dalla Costa and James, 1975, James, 1976, Federici, 2012, Carlin and Federici, 2014).

At the beginning of theories of social reproduction lies Karl Marx' materialist belief that it is the "embodied human practices through which socio-material life is produced and reproduced" (Ferguson and McNally, 2013: xviii). Consider how Marx frames the relation between production and reproduction in *Capital, Vol. I*. In Marx' discussion of the capitalist mode of production, what is concretely produced are commodities and what is concretely reproduced is labour-power. In fact, the two encounter each other in the commodity, since for Marx, what appears as the natural realm of commodity circulation in fact masks the commodities' point of origin in the dead labour that lies congealed in them. For

Marx and in line with his epoch's fascination with productive work, it is thus human labour-power that forms the basis of any productive system – as it essentially pertains to all humans – irrespective of their historical mode of production:

By labour-power or capacity to labour is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description [...] as labour is a creator of use-value, is useful labour, it is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race (1971: 164,150).

For Marx, labour power is the simple capacity to expend energy to extract a simple use out of any object, activity or process. As such, it forms the basis for capitalist production or any other social production process. If labour power is the potentiality to perform labour, then it is actualised in the labouring activity itself. “Labour power in use is labour itself” (ibid.: 173), as Marx confirms. Labour then is intimately tied to the living body of the worker but it also necessarily encompasses a social component, as for Marx, labour is never isolated but always occurs within a socially defined mode of production. In this dual definition of labour as both biological and social, lies the crux of Marx’ understanding of social reproduction. In order for any economic system to survive, society must reproduce a sufficient number of workers to continue the labour process. In addition, however, it must also reproduce the social conditions necessary for new workers to enter the labour force effectively, and continue the means of production. These social components include for example institutions, administrative structures and education. Marx gives the example of feudal society, in which “the product of the serf must [...] suffice to reproduce his *conditions of labour*, in addition to his subsistence” (ibid.: 531 Emphasis mine).

While Marx elaborated on the social component of reproduction in his discussions of the state and of ideology, he doesn't dwell on the biological side of reproduction at any particular length. Claiming that the labour power that workers sell on the market is “not a commodity like any other, for it is not produced capitalistically” (Vogel, 2013: 157), Marx seems to argue that labour power is ‘naturally’ reproduced by kinship structures such as the family that themselves pre-exist the development of capitalism. Marx thus envisions capitalism as simply ‘latching on’ to a kinship system that itself is left unchanged by it. In *Capital Vol. I*, he writes:

The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital [...] But the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker's drives for self-preservation and propagation. All the capitalist cares for is to reduce the worker's individual consumption to the necessary minimum (1971: 536-537).

What Marx here naturalises is the domestic sphere of the home and the housework that is daily performed in it. With this oversight, he also neglected the gendered dimension of this particular kind of reproductive work that is still today customarily done by women. Indeed, Marx’ anthropology presumed a cyclical and primitive reproduction to naturally occur in any given social system as an anthropological constant:

Whatever the form of the process of production in a society, it must be a continuous process, must continue to go periodically through the same phases. A society can no more cease to produce than it can cease to consume. When viewed, therefore, as a connected whole, and as flowing on with incessant renewal, every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction (1975: 565).

In opposition to this view of social reproduction as natural, organic and biologically determined, Marxist-Feminists in the 1970s began to theorise reproduction as the disavowed social relation at the heart of society. The group Wages for Housework (WfH) is exemplary in this regard. Founded by the Socialist Feminists Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James and Brigitte Galtier, WfH's basic claim was that Marx and the bulk of contemporary Marxist theory that came after him had grossly neglected the sphere of domestic work or housework that was the condition of possibility for both the capitalist economy as well as the workers' movement. They argued that the sphere of social reproduction, encompassing domestic work, child and elder care was excluded from consideration by the focus on productive work that privileged activities mainly carried out by men. In the words of Silvia Federici:

The reproduction of human beings is the foundation of every economic and political system, and [...] the immense amount of paid and unpaid domestic work done by women in the home is what keeps the world moving (2012: 2).

In straight continuation with Marx, what was concretely meant by reproduction was the reproduction of labour power or the maintenance, care and reconstitution of bodies with the ability to work. In the post-WW II era, women in the home mostly carried out this type of domestic work and feminists attempted to frame their experience through the concepts of Marxian political economy. In this way, the mundane chores of cooking, cleaning and childcare as well as the sexual politics of the bedroom came under critical scrutiny. While Marx recognised that during labour "a definite quantity of human muscle, nerve, brain, &c., is wasted, and these require to be restored" (1975: 181), his subsequent discussion centres on the wage, necessary to ensure this daily restoration and not on the unwaged domestic labour that ensures the worker's physical and emotional recovery, entirely outside the wage relation. Recognising Marx' gender-blindness, one of the central

aims of WfH was to gain clearer analytical traction on the precise nature of housework and its attached value within a Marxist framework.

However, besides a heady conceptual engagement with Marxist theory, WfH also developed a distinct political presence. Its strategy was to demand a wage for its performance of housework in order to denaturalise domestic labour and force its acknowledgement as socially necessary work. WfH argued that domestic labour was both productive of labour power as well as directly productive of capital and should therefore be adequately remunerated. Using Mario Tronti's concept of the 'social factory' (Tronti, 1973), to capture the subsumption of formerly unproductive spheres of life by the capitalist profit motive, women's reproductive labour in the home was recast as a foundational form of directly productive activity. Contrary to the established Marxist understanding, housework was not the 'other' of factory production but instead itself a central production site.

WfH was practically inspired by the American Welfare Mothers' initiative that saw black, female welfare recipients demand a wage for the raising of their children, rather than asking to be put to work. For WfH, the artificial division of the working class into men, who earned a wage in the factory, and women who restored them physically and mentally after work, was intended to separate the proletariat into wage-earners on the one hand and a naturalised sphere of reproductive work on the other that was culturally framed as a 'labour of love'. WfH posited that capitalism used the wage instrumentally to naturalise those types of work that were vital to its functioning but not acknowledged into the production process:

WfH was a revolutionary perspective not only because it exposed the root cause of "women's oppression" in a capitalist society but because it unmasked the main mechanisms by which capitalism has maintained its power and kept the working class divided. These are the devaluation of



entire spheres of human activity [...] and the ability to [...] extract work also from a large population of workers [...] outside the wage relation: slaves, colonial subjects, prisoners, housewives, and students [...] WfH was revolutionary [...] because we recognized that capitalism requires unwaged reproductive labor in order to contain the cost of labor power, and we believed that a successful campaign draining the source of this unpaid labor would break the process of capital accumulation (Federici, 2012: 8-9).

In the 1970s at a time when the international women's movement focused on getting women out of the home and into the workplace, many feminists did not see WfH favourably. However, it is important to note the double-strategy in the claim of wages for housework. As Federici emphasises, the demand for wages *for* housework was at the same time a demand for wages *against* housework, since the campaigning women knew that it was structurally impossible for capitalism to pay housewives adequately for their services. There was thus a strong performative dimension to their demand that aimed to demonstrate precisely the incapacity of the capitalist system to remunerate all of its workers for their labour. In this sense, WfH was much more radical than the mainstream feminists' demand of integration into the workplace, since it aimed to show the limits of the wage to ever provide more just and equal social relations. Capitalism, they argued, rested entirely on certain types of reproductive labour that were being made *structurally non-labour*.

## 1.4 A Dialectic of Social Spheres

It is this emphasis on the structural relation between a productive sphere that is officially validated as such and a reproductive sphere whose social function is framed as a labour of love that is key to my understanding of disaster. The Endnotes collective (2013) has recently systematised this relation in a way that contributes greatly to our discussion by offering a set of binary relations that I

extensively draw on in the following analysis. The first binary exists between the commercial sector where activities are performed for a direct profit and the non-commercial sector where activities are performed at a remove from immediate market interest. Endnotes call these spheres *directly market-mediated (DMM)*, and *indirectly market-mediated (IMM)* to highlight their interconnectedness in the totality of the capitalist mode of production (2013: 63). In the decades preceding the neoliberal turn of the 1970s, disaster aid, along with other public services has been firmly on the side of the IMM sphere, existing as a state-run investment into the reproduction of the population.

The second binary exists between waged and unwaged forms of activity that don't completely overlap with the commercial and non-commercial spheres. Importantly for our case and as Endnotes highlight, many reproductive services like education, health care and disaster aid are clearly not-for-profit activities and therefore unproductive of value. However, since civil servants who earn a wage for their work perform them, they still constitute a socially recognised form of labour, whose cost is paid for indirectly through deductions from collective taxes. They thus form paid, non-commercial IMM activities. By contrast, voluntary, unpaid disaster aid constitutes non-waged, non-commercial work. For Endnotes, it therefore strictly speaking does not represent labour but a kind of extra-activity, usually grounded in an affective motive, such as goodwill, love or charity. It is important to recognise how, even if they are structurally non-labour, these types of activity nevertheless form a large part of the reproduction of capitalist economic and political relations.

After this conceptual sketch, we are able to map the changes affecting the disaster sector. I argue that while formerly in the sphere of waged IMM activities, the US state has been increasingly unwilling to provide the public service of disaster aid. In the US, a country that is traditionally poor in the provision of welfare services but generous in the provision of disaster relief (Dauber, 2013), budgets

have been significantly cut, despite an increasing disaster-rate. Some of these formerly state-run services were privatised and transformed into commercial DMM activities in the form of insurances, thereby maintaining their relationship to the wage, while a large part of them stayed in the IMM sphere but became the unwaged responsibility of volunteers.

## **1.5 The Short American Century**

The following case studies seek to elucidate this conflicted process. They show how political struggles around disasters are fundamentally struggles around the spheres and responsibilities of the public and the private, the waged and the unwaged and the affective and the legal. They thus impact the very structural foundations of social life, as we know it. Concretely, they make visible the double movement of the inclusion of citizens into disaster administration and the coextensive exclusion of populations from the basic possibility of reproducing themselves.

As a historical prelude to the three case studies from the second half of the twentieth century, I begin in the 1930s with the integration of disaster relief into the federal (IMM) sphere during President Roosevelt's New Deal and in the immediate postwar era. I argue that federalising disaster aid served the purpose of creating employment in an ailing economic environment, as well as generating opportunities for infrastructural development. Above all, I show how the presence of a strong Keynesian state formed the relation between the state and civil society into a temporary union of shared interests.

Following the historical arc into the 1970s, the first comprehensive case study examines the militant reactions to structural violence in 1970s California, at a

time of austerity, in which the US government retracted many of the Keynesian promises of state-provided welfare. I investigate a movement that set the template for the idea of self-organised and autonomous social reproduction. Concretely, I study how the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, organised politically around their structural social exclusion that the party cast as a disaster. I examine the development of collective activities at the level of individual and community life that maintain life under conditions of structural aggression. While this suffering is structural and not evental, defying spectacular notions of disaster, its responses similarly defy vulnerability studies' schema of resilience and adaptation. What is being organised instead, are practices of social reproduction, defined as the ability of people to reproduce their lives and livelihoods under conditions of structural exclusion, rather than vulnerability. While the examined practices are ameliorative and seek to facilitate the lives of their recipients, contrary to resilient practices, they contest the schema of mere adaptation, in which NGOs and self-organised groups cushion the violence of governmental policies. Instead, these are practices of self-defence, which are visionary and not reactive. Furthermore, the case study examines how a language of disaster was used productively by the Panthers to dramatise a situation that US society disavowed as normal. It thus wrests the power to call the disaster from a position of authority to the people and examines the power of naming the disaster as a political strategy. Located at the beginning of the 1970s, the Panthers' exemplify a political transition from classical black working class politics to a politics of social reproduction that attempts to rival the state in its monopoly on welfare service provision.

The second case study moves into the 1990s and travels East to Chicago to chart the theoretical and practical transfer from a notion of exclusion to a notion of vulnerability during disasters. In 1995 the Chicago heat wave claimed over 700 lives in the course of only a week. Trying to make sense of the unnaturally high mortality rate, the sociologist Eric Klinenberg put forward a bold hypothesis: Those areas in which mortality was highest were also the neighbourhoods with the highest crime

rates. As a consequence of persistent violent crime, residents shored themselves up indoors, a strategy which proved fatal during the heat wave. Representing a view I call state-centred vulnerability, Klinenberg sees the city government as directly responsible for the criminal decay of civil society. Consequently, he appeals to the city authorities to put reparative policies in place that would lower the crime rate, thus diminishing disaster vulnerability. Beginning with Klinenberg's analysis of the heat wave, this chapter establishes the difference between a state-centred approach to vulnerability and a civil-society-centred approach to vulnerability, before evaluating their validity today.

The third case study is the most recent one and addresses the role of civil-society-centred vulnerability during the 2012 Superstorm Sandy. Since the *vulnerability turn* of the 1970s, disaster studies has vocally advanced citizen participation as a powerful tool for building community resilience. Much is made of the field's turn away from technocratic state authority and its affirmation of local, embedded and decentralised aid practices in the fight against disasters. The case study complicates this progressive narrative. It examines the exemplary case of *Occupy Sandy*, a large-scale, self-organised relief initiative, launched by the social movement *Occupy Wall Street* in response to the 2012 *Superstorm Sandy*. It firstly discusses Occupy Sandy's presence as the most successful relief provider on the ground, far surpassing the efficacy of the Red Cross and of FEMA. Secondly, it reflects on the counter-intuitive endorsement of the group by the centralized government agency, the Department of Homeland Security. Situating the bizarre proximity between anarchist social movement and governmental mega-institution in the context of the continued withdrawal of the U.S state from the provision of welfare services, the chapter finally reflects on the political currency of *vulnerability* and its role within a new configuration between the state and civil society in times of austerity.

In a concluding chapter, I interrogate the recent critical return to the practices of the Black Panther Party and question their contemporary validity. Recent political theory has shown a renewed interest in practices of resistant self-organisation that are cast as forms of dual power, autonomous social reproductive services, able to rival the state in efficiency and delivery. I critically examine these claims while arguing that today, many of the reproductive services that the Panthers offered to their community free of charge have become integrated into state policy schemes, turning resistant political action into co-opted governmental tool. In addition, I summarise my research findings and offer a few remarks regarding further research. Before beginning with the properly analytical task of mapping the changes to the reproductive relief sector onto the economic crisis, let us examine the field of disaster studies and ask why disasters are so often understood non-systematically as exceptional moments, rather than structural conditions? Asking this allows us to measure the urgency of a social reproduction approach to disasters.

## II Literature Review: Against Vulnerability, Beyond Resilience

*Katrina offered us a vision of the future, and it is not a resilient one.*

– Kathleen Tierney

### 2 Bombs and other Disasters

Why are disasters so often understood as sudden, rupturing events? In order to depart from the impasse of an event-based conception of emergency, I argue that disaster studies' history has to be reconstructed materialistically. Establishing itself in the post-war climate of the 1950s and taking shape during the Cold War, the scientific study of disasters began in a wartime context that sought to understand and control crowd behaviour during enemy bombardments. The very first recorded 'disaster investigation' was the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, which studied the impact of the allied bombardment of Japanese and European cities (Iklé, 1951, Air University, 1987, Davis, 2002). Systematising this research and extending it from military applications to the civilian domain, the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago conducted a series of studies on infrastructure accidents such as airplane crashes but also on various fires and an earthquake. In 1952, the Disaster Research Group was founded at the National Research Council to survey the current state of disaster research (Williams, 1954, Perry, 2007), making it the first ever disaster research centre. In this way, the experience of war became the template for our perception of the most diverse kinds of natural and man-made disasters.

The scientific paradigm through which disasters were understood then and now was cybernetics, an interdisciplinary research field that studies socio-technological systems and their interactions with other systems, their so-called

feedback. The philosopher of science Peter Galison describes how Norbert Wiener, physics extraordinaire and military advisor “coined the term cybernetics in the summer of 1947 to designate what he hoped would be a new science of control mechanisms in which the exchange of information would play a central role (1994: 232) Concretely, what was supposed to be controlled was antiaircraft fire and crowd behaviour in urban environments, beleaguered by German bombers. While early cyberneticists looked at systems as closed and centralised, the experience of Nazi bombardments in Britain, and its growing possibility in the US, caused a strong interest in decentralised systems, creating the sprawling suburb with no localisable centre as a defence strategy in its wake (Galison, 2001).<sup>13</sup> As the history of the cybernetic paradigm evolved in an attempt to control evermore amorphous and diffuse networks, the way in which disasters were understood as disruptions to complex systems evolved with it. However, while disaster scholars themselves make much out of distancing themselves from their control room origins, their emphasis on predicting contingencies and regulating population response is very much in keeping with cybernetics’ militarised focus on crowd control.

The bombs on Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki thus became a laboratory for American emergency planning or, in the language of the emerging disaster scholars, they became templates for “a failure of a social system to deliver reasonable conditions of life” (Perry, 2007: 5). Based on research into crowd behaviour by social psychologists and sociologists, influenced by systems theory, disaster studies established itself as a discipline in close connection with the government and the military with the goal of researching past contingencies in order to contain future threats. At the time of a nationally cultivated fear of a Soviet nuclear attack, the new disasters centres’ task became to better predict the likelihood and effects of contingencies and develop policies that would build

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<sup>13</sup> In his article, ‘War against the centre’, Peter Galison argues that it was the vulnerability of centralised structures to bombing that caused the American suburban sprawl as well as the planned distribution of vital infrastructures across the country and even underground. See Galison, P. (2001). “War against the Center.” *Grey Room* 4: 5-33.



resilience. Research into disasters was therefore always tied to behavioural protocols, suggesting a normative reordering of population response, according to “exceptions” and “exception routines” (Stallings, 1998).

Summing up the last 70 years of disaster research, a recent review article defines the field as follows:

Disaster studies address the social and behavioural aspects of sudden onset collective stress situations typically referred to as mass emergencies or disaster. These situations can be created by natural hazards, technological accidents, violent intergroup conflicts, shortages of vital resources and other major hazards to life, health, property, well-being and everyday routines (Lindell, 2013: 798).

Despite the variety of situations Lindell counts as disasters, all of his scenarios are envisioned as “sudden” disturbances to an established system. This “figure of time” (Juengel, 2009), in which an unexpected event ruptures a relatively ‘normal’ rule configures the imaginary of everyday ordinariness confronted with an exceptional event that has become characteristic of our view of disaster. It assumes that society follows an established and calm course that is occasionally and spectacularly interrupted by a sudden event.

## **2.1 Challenging the Event: From Centralised to Decentralised Control**

In the 1970s, this technocratic view of disaster as a disruptive event, necessitating a mainly technical solution was challenged. In the 1970s US geographers, loosely affiliated with second-order cybernetics<sup>14</sup> developed a so-

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<sup>14</sup> The anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead contrasted Wiener’s first order cybernetics with their own new brand of second-order cybernetics. Modelling itself on biology and living organisms, rather than on machines and on physics, this new cybernetics elaborated sophisticated accounts of

called hazards approach (Burton and Kates, 1964, Burton, Kates et al., 1993) that, rather than only looking at a disaster's effects on the ground, sought to understand the environmental and man-made triggers that caused disasters. This school defined disaster as "the interface between an extreme physical event and a vulnerable human population (Susman, O'Keefe et al., 1983: 264)". Following on in this vein, the geographer Kenneth Hewitt argued in 1983 that it was insufficient to view disasters merely as geophysical occurrences that disrupted an otherwise normal state of affairs (Hewitt, 1983, Hewitt, 1997). Disasters were rather, he proposed, the result of social action and social processes. They were thus thoroughly anthropogenic in nature and their time-scale extended far beyond the immediacy of a singular event.

With this, Hewitt ushered in the so-called vulnerability approach that dominates sociological and anthropological disaster research today. The vulnerability framework extends the analytic gaze beyond the immediacy of the disaster onto the social, cultural, political, and ecological conditions that played a role in its production or exacerbated its severity (Blaikie, Cannon et al., 1994, Bankoff, Frerks et al., 2004, Wisner, Gaillard et al., 2012, Tierney, 2014). Formerly seen in technocratic terms as a contingent event that necessitated a swift, mainly technical solution, disasters were until the 1980s talked about in a vocabulary that effaced their social logic. The vulnerability approach argued on the contrary that disasters are the result of underlying conditions of social vulnerability coupled with an external hazard. In the paradigmatic definition of Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon and Davis:

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decentralised, open systems, in which the system's observer always directly affects the system itself. For an account of the transition to second order cybernetics, see Von Foerster, H. (2003). Understanding understanding: essays on cybernetics and cognition. New York, Springer.. Despite its self-description as emancipatory and anti-hierarchical, Alexander Galloway has repeatedly shown how political control persists and even flourishes, particularly "after decentralisation". See Galloway, A. R. (2004). Protocol: how control exists after decentralization. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press.

By vulnerability we mean the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard (an extreme natural event or process) (2004: 11).

For vulnerability scholars, this holds true for whichever kind of disaster we are talking about. Rather than resulting from forces of nature or failures in technology, disasters are in this perspective always the effect of a particular configuration of the social that cumulatively produces a disaster over time. Hewitt's path breaking work of the 1980s was continued by Dennis Mileti, who developed a holistic perspective on disasters that starts from vulnerability and highlights the production of disasters in interconnected social and natural environments. By highlighting the social components that produce disasters, the vulnerability approach emphasised the political responsibility of power-holders and decision-makers. Sharpening this social responsibility, Mileti argued that all disasters are the result of decisions that organisations "make or fail to make" (1999: 39).

Starting from the assumption of social root causes for disaster, the vulnerability approach greatly extended the analytical horizon of disaster research by privileging an analysis of social structure over the rupturing event. This structural view has also enabled a strong politicisation of the field. Taking a critical stance towards the capitalist tenets of development, free trade and competition, the vulnerability approach argues that if today 75% of global disasters occur in the global South (Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2004: 3), this is due to capitalist hegemony and development aggression, forcing local communities to adapt to fierce competition, thereby causing widespread damage to the environment. For Eric Klinenberg (1999), the zooming-out movement of the vulnerability approach makes it possible to "denaturalise" disasters and tease out their underlying political economy. In this context, Greg Bankoff and Dorothea Hilhorst have pointed out that the exposure of vulnerable communities to disaster most often follows established power

relations of class, race and gender. The unequal exposure to disaster is thus “largely a function of the power relations operative in every society” (Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2004: 2).

## 2.2 Self-Help Hell

Connecting this discussion to our case of the corpses in the New Orleans streets, I argue that disaster studies’ household theory of vulnerability is not sensitive to the wider historical transformations that have affected the disaster sector, which makes its promotion of resilience fall short of actually being ameliorative. Adopting a navel-gazing, self-congratulatory stance regarding its internal disciplinary progression, disaster studies furthermore remains tied to classical notions of evental harm that ultimately curtail its analytic depth. If vulnerability scholars have conducted in-depth analyses of unequal social, political, ecological and economic conditions, they have paradoxically limited the impact of their rich, structural studies by always relating them back to the exposure to an evental disaster, now called hazard. They have thus held on to the normative idea of a more or less stable everyday state that is impacted by a sudden disruption. For vulnerability studies, the disruption may have been decades in the making, however, its onset is still imagined as sudden and unexpected.

This creates a paradoxical situation, in which vulnerability studies’ detailed investigations into structural inequality and impoverishment are *only* relevant insofar as these conditions expose communities to a possible external hazard. While the innovation of vulnerability studies lay precisely in drawing attention to the *structural* dimension of disasters, they too quickly return to a hazards-perspective that casts their entire research endeavour in light of a spectacular event

or tipping point,<sup>15</sup> at which previously tolerable conditions are framed as intolerable. Furthermore, in vulnerability studies, extreme disruptions become the norm, reminiscent of the way in which the current ‘war on terror’ makes it impossible to ever conceive of a time of actually existing peace.

Another, more significant shortcoming of vulnerability studies concerns not its diagnosis but its effects on the ground, or its proposed solution attempt to diminish vulnerability. Arguing that the seeds of community vulnerability lie both in the global (mis)distribution of wealth but also in embedded structures of community life, the framework promotes a self-help approach that places the responsibility to improve vulnerable conditions squarely within the community itself, rather than challenging power holders and holding them accountable for creating disproportionate vulnerability. Researchers on Hurricane Katrina for instance have argued that the excessive vulnerability of black residents during the flooding of New Orleans was due to the high numbers of African-American renters who had to rely on the goodwill of landlords to provide safe and flood-proof housing (Laska and Morrow, 2006).

This perspective promotes private, owner-occupied housing as a path to safety, since it is assumed that homeowners act more responsibly in maintaining a safe domestic environment. Contesting this endorsement of homeownership, Fussell, Sastry and VanLandingham (2010) have shown that it was black *homeowners in particular* who bore the brunt of the destruction and experienced far greater housing damage than white residents, often making them unable to return to New Orleans post-Katrina. Indeed, the push towards privatization in the 1980s and

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<sup>15</sup> Chris Russil and Chad Lavin have explored how the tipping point metaphor was used during Hurricane Katrina to separate a pre-disaster ordinary from the alleged onset of social disintegration. See Russil, C. and C. Lavin (2011). From tipping point to meta-crisis: management, media, and Hurricane Katrina. The neoliberal deluge: Hurricane Katrina, late capitalism, and the remaking of New Orleans. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. C. Johnson: 3-31. Isak Winkel Holm and I discuss the tipping point concept further in relation to outbreak and contagion narratives in disasters. See Illner, P. and I. W. Holm (2015). Making Sense of Disaster. Disaster Research. Multidisciplinary and international perspectives. R. Dahlberg, O. Rubin and M. T. Vendelø. London; New York, Routledge: 51-64.

1990s often encouraged former tenants in urban areas to buy property on low-lying, unsafe ground. Furthermore, the necessity to insure a private home made house owners purchase hurricane insurance but often no flood insurance, since their municipality had reassured them that New Orleans would not be flooded again.

Here, vulnerability scholars, who advocate homeownership as a tactic to build disaster resilience are proven wrong, since it was precisely *privatisation* that caused disproportionate housing damage to African-American residents. In his in-depth study on the privatization of public housing in New Orleans, John Arena hammers another nail into the coffin of vulnerability studies' credo of responsibility through entrepreneurship. Arena shows how the sell-off of public housing was essentially carried out not by local governments but by non-profit tenant organisations in cooperation with large real estate firms. He describes how the discourse of privatisation was shared by real estate firms and social movements alike, who promoted a view in which disaster victims were themselves seen as responsible for their damage:

Tenant management would provide public housing residents, Mayor Moria explained, with "the social and psychological benefits of self-determination and the acceptance of responsibility" [...] and would therefore help wean them off government dependence. This line of thinking was wholly consistent with the racialized self-help ideology that increasingly took hold in the 1980s in the context of Reaganite retrenchment. The message to African Americans was clear: the solutions and sources of the social problems they faced – such as lack of jobs and housing – were rooted in their communities (2012: 57-58).

## 2.3 Producing Disasters, Promoting Resilience?<sup>16</sup>

Arena's study is provocative in that it challenges the most dearly held assumption within vulnerability studies, namely that individuals and groups should self-organise and assume responsibility to become resilient to disasters. Resilience is a concept originating in ecology that is today applied in a variety of contexts from psychology to organisational theory to sports and military theory. Resilience designates the capacity of a system to withstand strain and pressure without incurring fatal damage. Being a descriptive as well as a normative term, resilient structures are flexible in that they can persevere in a variety of environments without needing excessive resources for their survival. Resilience privileges subjects or communities who manage to make do with very little, in times when resources are scarce. The 100 Resilient Cities initiative funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and launched in 2013 lists different factors that make cities "survive and thrive regardless of the challenge".<sup>17</sup> They suggest that resilient cities are *flexible*, i.e. they easily adapt to constantly changing environments, in which disruption is the norm. They are *resourceful*, meaning they possess optimal resource allocation under conditions of scarcity. Finally, they are *robust* in that they possess durable systems that can withstand prolonged stress. Political theorist Mark Neocleous explains the basic mechanism of resilience:

Stemming from the idea of a system and originating in ecological thought, the term connotes the capacity of a system to return to a previous state, to recover from a shock, or to bounce back after a crisis or trauma (2013: 3).

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<sup>16</sup> This is the title of a 2014 monograph by the disaster scholar Kathleen Tierney. While Tierney was strongly advocating resilience in this book, she had a recent change of heart, as an article published in 2015 is highly critical of the concept. See Tierney, K. (2014). The Social Roots of Risk: Producing Disasters, Promoting Resilience. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press. For the 2015 article, see Tierney, K. (2015). "Resilience and the Neoliberal Project." American Behavioural Scientist 59(10): 1327-1342.

<sup>17</sup> See the website of the 100 Resilient Cities Initiative. <http://www.100resilientcities.org/#/-/> (Accessed 26.01.2016)

In vulnerability studies, vulnerability and resilience imply each other. If communities are diagnosed as vulnerable to disasters due to structural conditions of income inequality, racial discrimination, economic marginalisation and generational neglect (Klinenberg, 1999), for disaster studies, the way out of these conditions is not resistance, i.e. political organising that targets the root causes of this predicament in an attempt to change it, but adaptation and resilience. Becoming resilient is a coping strategy. It accepts that marginalised people are disproportionately exposed to suffering and harm and entices victims to become active in overcoming their damage. Rather than collectively trying to change the situation in which the damage was incurred, it rewards communities who manage to overcome their predicament individually, while leaving its causes untouched. For political theorist Julian Reid a resilient subject is thus “a subject that accepts the disastrousness of the world it lives in as a condition for partaking in that world” (2013: 355). Resilient subjects have “accepted the imperative not to resist or secure themselves from the dangers they face but instead adapt to their enabling conditions” (ibid.).

Moreover, this personal overcoming becomes a yardstick that measures success. Communities that successfully become resilient to their harmful milieu are rewarded with status gains. Those communities or individuals who don't manage to overcome their damage are left behind or shamed for not being *resilient enough*. If resilience would be a movie genre, it would be *film noir*, presenting a dark and gritty world that rewards those, sharp-witted enough to develop survival tactics to get by. If it were a rap album it would be 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Trying*, which turns economic deprivation into a resource for aspirational success. As an attitude, its character is captured by what architect and political theorist Eyal Weizman calls *the politics of lesser evil* (2011), a hard-nosed political reasoning that is resigned to the harsh reality of violence and that barter over its incremental degrees. Resilience is Thatcherite *Realpolitik* of the toughest kind. Taking for granted that there is no such



thing as society, it regards damage and violence as individual dramas, requiring individual solutions.

In contemporary disaster studies, resilience is an absolute buzzword. A Google Scholar search on “disaster” and “resilience” brings up the following examples in 0,2 seconds. *Designing Resilience: Preparing for Extreme Events* (Comfort, Boin et al., 2010), *Psychological Resilience After Disaster. New York City in the Aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> Terrorist Attack* (Bonanno, Galea et al., 2006), *The Resilience Dividend: Being Strong in a World where Things go Wrong* (Rodin, 2014) and *Women Confronting Natural Disaster. From Vulnerability to Resilience* (Enarson, 2012). Schematically, these works present the same basic argument, split into five parts. 1. A hazard or source of harm is diagnosed 2. It is noted that marginalised groups (poor people of colour, women, children etc.) are disproportionately vulnerable to this natural or man-made hazard 3. Vulnerable groups’ self-help practices are studied that show how strong communities recover from their incurred damage and rise above their poor predicament. 4. It is concluded that some communities are more resilient in overcoming their damage than others. 5. Those successful communities are rewarded through capital or status gains, while those who are insufficiently resilient are stigmatised as underperforming.

The problem with this argument is that by focusing on a community’s resilient capacities, it completely naturalises the incurred damage, which is presented as an unavoidable law of nature. In the words of disaster researcher Kathleen Tierney, a former resilience scholar who recently changed her mind on the matter, in resilience, “disruptive change is naturalised and framed as inevitable. Its root causes cannot be altered, and the only reasonable response is to adapt” (2015: 1333). This fatalism is captured by what the cultural theorist Robin James calls the resilience cycle. Firstly, damage is incited (disaster strikes due to vulnerable conditions); Secondly, that damage is “spectacularly overcome and that overcoming is broadcast (2015: 7)”; Thirdly, those who overcome are rewarded with status or

capital gains while those who do not manage to overcome are shamed as failures to ‘normal’ ways of coping with stress. In the current European financial crisis for instance, countries that enforced austerity measures on their population were publicly rewarded, while Greece’s Syriza party was shamed for not ‘responsibly’ investing its assets to maximise the country’s economic resilience. As Robin James concludes:

Resilience is [...] the underlying value or ideal that determines how we organize [...] political and social institutions, the economy, concepts of selfhood, and so on. Resilience is the hegemonic or “common sense” ideology that everything is to be measured [...] by its health. This “health” is maintained by bouncing back from injury and crisis in a way that capitalizes on deficits so that you end up ahead of where you initially started (one step back, two steps forward) (2015: 4).

The irony is that even though disaster studies champions resilience to overcome structural vulnerability, it is absurd to presume resilience could do so in the long run. Resilience needs damage to thrive, since without it, the task of overcoming would be impossible and its connected capital and status gains would be annulled. While I agree with vulnerability studies’ critical investigations into structural marginalisation, I reject its premise that communities are best served by becoming resilient to their predicament. In summary, resilience appears as the wrong answer to a correct question.

I argue that the fundamental disregard for African-American lives that the U.S government demonstrated by letting disaster victims rot in the streets of New Orleans alerts us to a dimension of disaster that vulnerability studies does *not* capture, since it happens at a remove from a direct hazard. While vulnerability studies may analyse the disproportionate vulnerability of blacks during Hurricane Katrina, which it has variously attributed to disaster myths and racist media bias

(Tierney, 2006) the absence of car ownership for the evacuation of the black community (Litman, 2006) or problems in elder care (Brunkard, Namulanda et al., 2008) it cannot account for the fact that in the US, blacks have a life expectancy that is around seven years less than that of white people within the same socio-economic bracket (Anderson, McNeilly et al., 1991). While this pressure constitutes a clear biological disadvantage, resulting from class and race marginalisation, it is normalised through the institution of the private health care system, in which health and the management of health risks are individualised as personal choices.

## 2.4 Slow Violence

How can we benefit from the analytical depth of vulnerability studies without endorsing its short-sighted solution attempts? The theme of temporally extended, accretive suffering has recently been examined through the paradigmatic concept of *slow violence* by the literary scholar Rob Nixon. Nixon's starting point is the disproportionate media attention on spectacular instances of violence such as natural disasters, war crimes and terrorist attacks. Echoing Guy Debord's critique in *Society of the Spectacle*, Nixon argues that the mediatic overload with dramatic images of suffering obscures those instances of violence that are more discrete, and more widely distributed in space and time. Particularly environmental violence, in which the toxicity of water or air might only manifest itself after several generations, goes unnoticed in a public culture that lives off the instant availability of scandalous information. For Nixon, slow violence is:

a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is

neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales (2011: 2).

Slow violence is bound up with what the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen has called the *Anthropocene*, a new geological period that has supposedly started with the Industrial Revolution and in which humans have begun to significantly affect the Earth's ecosystems. Indeed, the very fact that the scientific community has only now, some 250 years after its occurrence, become aware of humanity's disastrous impact on the planet is a good example of Nixon's theory of slow violence, in which a forceful acting upon nature might only become apparent centuries later, due to effects such as rising sea level temperatures, melting pole caps and submerged island states. These disastrous effects can be interpreted as the symptoms of violence, done slowly and accretively over the decades. Nixon then highlights two problems regarding slow violence, one representational and the other legal.

The representational problem asks how to adequately depict, talk and write about the brutal, but delayed effects of slow violence in an age that privileges the sudden eventfulness of direct accidents and attacks? For Nixon:

The insidious workings of slow violence derive largely from the unequal attention given to spectacular and unspectacular time. In an age that venerates instant spectacle, slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie theaters and boost ratings on TV (2011: 6).

The second issue Nixon raises with regard to slow violence is connected to his problematisation of the witness and concerns the relative powerlessness of classical legal forums to account for the effects of slow violence. If the accretive and distributed attrition of communities' life-environments exceeds the lifespan of

individuals and only manifests itself as massively delayed, who will press charges over such acts of violence and who will be taken to court, if those responsible for the damage are long dead or have been ousted by the short-lived temporality of political office? Our contemporary legal system works on the Westphalian basis of the accountability of individuals or the autonomy of nation states as bounded legal actors. This system clashes with the phenomenon of slow violence that exceeds individual accountability just as much as it traverses the territorial boundaries of states. For Nixon this paradox creates a situation, in which the victims of slow violence remain below the radar and do not surface into the existing arenas of legal negotiation:

In the long arc between the emergence of slow violence and its delayed effects, both the causes and the memory of catastrophe readily fade from view as the casualties incurred typically pass untallied and unremembered. Such discounting in turn makes it far more difficult to secure effective legal measures for prevention, restitution, and redress. Casualties from slow violence are, moreover, out of sync not only with our narrative and media expectations but also with the swift seasons of electoral change (2011: 9).

While I agree with Nixon's injunction to "complicate conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound and body bound" (2011: 3), I am sceptical of two elements of his account. Firstly, the privileging of environmental factors in his discussion of slow violence and secondly, Nixon's optimism concerning the law as a potential positive force of redress. Concerning the first point, in Nixon's account, violence done to humans is framed as active and direct, whereas violence done to nature appears as passive and indirect. He thereby reintroduces a curious nature-culture binary through the backdoor after laboriously debunking it. While Nixon acknowledges the applicability of slow violence to a number of phenomena from "domestic abuse to posttraumatic stress syndrome" (ibid.), he subsequently

concentrates on environmental violence, implying that violence against nature is different in kind (more diffuse, extended, spread out) from violence against humans. Why is it that the most paradigmatic examples of slow violence are “toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, and accelerated species loss (ibid.)” rather than the gradual erosion of the welfare state, the cutback of education and health care and the exposure of populations to urban immiseration. These instances of diffuse stress and pressure are no less slow and no less violent than environmental crimes in that they constitute a slow degradation of the conditions that sustain life.

Furthermore, I argue that in situations where social and biological pressures operate in the realm of everyday normality, outside the legal realm and where no crime has been committed, the hope that Nixon invests in the legal realm as a forum of redress appears misguided. To be effective, political critique must attack the very entanglement between slow violence and the law, rather than seeing the legal form as an untarnished reparative power that is simply available for taking.

Theorists working in the wake of Karl Marx’ historical account of structural violence have developed sophisticated analyses of slow and structural violence that avoid falling back onto a neatly defined event or hazard and that are not reducible to the demand for compensation for openly committed crimes. Drawing on these can help us reap the analytical benefits of vulnerability studies without foreshortening our view by problematizing structural violence only when it gives rise to a drastic event or violates legal boundaries. Two concepts of temporally extended, accretive suffering have proven especially fruitful in this regard; *Objective Violence* by Slavoj Žižek and at a deeper theoretical level, *Ultraobjective Violence* by Étienne Balibar. Let us review these concepts before establishing their relevance regarding disasters today.

## 2.5 The Objectivity of Violence

Slavoj Žižek begins his 2008 book *Violence* with a critique of the disproportionate media attention on spectacular instances of violence such as natural disasters, war crimes and terrorist attacks. For Žižek, this *subjective violence*, in which there is an identifiable aggressor and a clearly suffering victim “is only the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence” (2008: 1). These are, on the one hand, the symbolic violence that adheres to language and its representative capacity. Think for instance of how disaster victims in New Orleans were labelled *thugs* by the national media, as shorthand for “young black males”. Then there is structural violence, which for Žižek connotes the violence that inheres in the “smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (ibid.: 2). The model for *objective violence* for both Žižek as well as Balibar is Karl Marx’ account of the development of capitalism through *primitive accumulation*, including the enclosure of land and the enslavement of African populations as well as capitalism’s harnessing of female reproductive power to ensure a steady supply of labourers.<sup>18</sup>

For Žižek, the thing to grasp about objective violence is that it is not simply an abstraction behind which lurk identifiable agents and aggressors. Recall how during the 2008 financial crisis, the media kept emphasising that it was “greedy bankers” who broke with their Protestant restraint and had over-speculated that were behind the market collapse. In Žižek’s account, nothing could be further from the truth. He emphasises the truly systemic nature of capitalist development that unfolds through the perpetual reproduction of the relation between capital assets and workers. This relation has a dynamic of its own that is irreducible to the covert activities of corporate bosses and media moguls and indeed irreducible to *any*

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<sup>18</sup> For a book length account of the reproductive dimension of primitive accumulation and the subjugation of women, see Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the Witch*. New York, Autonomedia.

subjective agent. For Žižek, the analytic task is to resist the narrative lure of reducing objective violence to agents and actors and instead examine its unfolding logic. As Žižek remarks about the process of capitalist accumulation:

The problem is that this “abstraction” is not only in our financial speculators' misperception of social reality, but that it is “real” in the precise sense of determining the structure of the material social processes (2008: 12).

The positing of an abstract social dynamic that is nevertheless real and determining is one of the innovations of the Marxist legacy, which is encapsulated in the term real abstraction.<sup>19</sup> Rather than maintaining that abstract ideas are the result of purely mental processes or the conceptual innovations of science, Marxists point out that concepts, ideas and cultural forms are the result of a social process of material production and exchange. While this theory has often been reduced to a vulgar determinism, it is important to insist that processes of material exchange are complex and contradictory and not assimilable to a straightforward relation of unilateral determination. As the political philosopher Alberto Toscano emphasises:

Marx's methodological revolution [is] his formulation of a historical-materialist study of social, cultural, and intellectual abstractions on the basis of the real abstractions of the value-form, money, and abstract labour (2010: 190).

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<sup>19</sup> The concept of Real Abstraction was initially put forward by Alfred Sohn-Rethel, a German associate of the Frankfurt School. Deconstructing the Western philosophical edifice, in particular the idealist philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Sohn-Rethel advanced that the philosophical idea of autonomous subjects was rooted in the general equivalence of money and commodity exchange, which he argued were historically co-emergent. Simultaneously in the Soviet Union, Jewgeni Pashukanis put forward a strikingly similar thesis, which argued for the birth of the legal equivalence of subjects out of commodity exchange. Sohn-Rethel strongly influenced Theodor Adorno's reflections on abstraction. See Sohn-Rethel, A. (1978). *Intellectual and manual labour: a critique of epistemology*. London, Macmillan. and Pashukanis, E. B. (2002). *The general theory of law & Marxism*. New Brunswick, N.J., Transaction Publishers. For a fine summary of these positions see Toscano, A. (2008). "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction." *Rethinking Marxism* 20(2): 273-287.



While Žižek works on this basis, he maintains that there is a representational problem inherent in the depiction of objective violence as the material-social process under capitalism. On the one hand, the persistent focus on eruptive, subjective violence obscures and blanks out a slow and patient analysis of this violence's embedded social conditions. The parallel with disasters is clear. Subjective violence is always perceived as an exception to an otherwise normal rule, which is presumed to be non-violent. However, this normal rule bears the mark of objective violence. More radically still, subjective violence only exists on account of the objective violence inherent in our socio-economic system. In Žižek's words:

Subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the "normal," peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this "normal" state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent (2008: 2).

On the other hand, there also appears to be a profound representational problem regarding objective violence itself, which is independent of the blinding effects of subjective violence. The problem is: How can we depict an ongoing social process of marginalisation and exclusion that is rarely clearly visible and condensed in an event, but constitutes the normal functioning of society?<sup>20</sup> We will return to this question below. First, let us see how Étienne Balibar addresses the relation between subjective and objective violence.

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<sup>20</sup> The thorny question of representing the objective violence of capitalism has often been answered in the realm of art. For a book length discussion of documentary practices that tackle this issue, see Toscano, A. and J. Kinkle (2015). *Cartographies of the Absolute*. Winchester, Zero Books, John Hunt Publishing. For a more philosophical discussion of the problem of social structure and representation, see Galloway, A. (2011). "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 28(7-8): 85-102.

## 2.6 Ultraviolence

Étienne Balibar starts his discussion of violence by reiterating Slavoj Žižek's distinction between a subjective and direct exercise of violence and its objective, indirect form. However, rather than leaving subjective violence by the analytic wayside, he insists on the necessity to “think the ever *greater objectivity* and simultaneously, the ever *greater subjectivity* of violence” (2015: 12), i.e. to think both instances of violence together. Let us look at both aspects of violence in turn. Interestingly for our case, Balibar's first examples of objective or ultraobjective violence are cases of ‘natural’ disaster:

Ultraobjective forms of violence: this means forms in which violence is even more closely intertwined with naturalness and universality. I have in mind, to begin with, the effects that certain epidemics, floods, earthquakes, or phenomena of desertification have today, and the way they are presented to us. Nothing is less purely natural than these supposedly “natural” disasters; rather, nothing is less natural than their differential effect on the regions of the world and their populations, some of which are considered masterworks in danger while others are portrayed as supernumerary and blamed for the “demographic time-bomb” threatening the planet (2015: 12).

Balibar's point here is in line with vulnerability scholars' stating that there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ disaster. Both emphasise that the disproportionate production of vulnerability across the North-South divide is inherent in capitalism's combined and uneven development that produces staggering wage differentials, exploited by worldwide manufacture and creating different gradations of misery and exposure to harm. While vulnerability scholars simply note this fact without analysing its mechanism, Balibar highlights the way in which the *ultraobjective violence* of the global market works by reducing people to numbers. It is through the *numerical aspect* inherent in ultraobjective violence that people are regulated and

governed by rendering certain populations of the global north as precious and worthy of investment, while framing others as “superfluous or excessive, so that their presence no longer has a place – even from the standpoint of the reproduction of capitalist conditions” (2015: 69). Ultrasubjective violence on the other hand reverses this numerical reduction and instead highlights people’s distinctly negative qualities as individuals and agents. Subjective violence is dramatic and brutally excessive force, directed at individuals and groups that are “represented as incarnations of evil, diabolical powers that threaten the subject from within and have to be eliminated at all costs, up to and including self-destruction” (2015: 52).

Balibar emphasises that while appearing as polar opposites on a violent spectrum, ultraobjective and ultrasubjective violence actually imply each other. A good example of this is the way that Middle Eastern refugees are currently treated by many European countries. On the ultraobjective end, the incoming populations are depicted as an a-personal swarm or a flood, threatening to overpower the host nations through their sheer force in numbers. Ironically, the host nations simultaneously worry about the lack of children among its citizenry but do not accept the intake of refugees as a viable solution to the demographic problem.<sup>21</sup> The numerical logic is in full force here. While European populations are framed as precious and in need of nurture, Middle Eastern people are reduced to an abstract and quantitative threat. Simultaneously however, this abstract threat is personified whenever needed, as the European media endlessly regurgitate images of allegedly religiously inspired Muslim sexual harassment crimes that emphasise the cultural divide between an allegedly post-sexist West and a ‘regressive’ Middle East, steeped in misogyny.

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<sup>21</sup> In 2015, a billboard by the Danish Ministry of Health, depicting a hand, cradling chicken eggs exhibited this reproduction anxiety formidably. The caption read: “Have you counted your eggs today? You are twice as likely to become pregnant with 25, compared to with 35.” The billboard’s message at the height of the refugee ‘crisis’ was clear: Danes, please give us more white kids. Immigrants, please keep out!

To make his argument, Balibar proceeds by means of a meticulous philosophical historicisation of the interconnected dimensions of violence. While vulnerability scholars may have followed Balibar's bifurcated theory of violence up to this point, his immanent historicisation of structural violence departs significantly from vulnerability studies by highlighting how the production of vulnerable populations emerges alongside their historical capacity for resistance. Balibar locates two main traditions in the Western treatment of violence, one Hobbesian and the other Hegelian. Commenting on today's general "return to Hobbes" by the likes of Giorgio Agamben, Tiqqun and Alain Badiou,<sup>22</sup> Balibar characterises this Hobbesianism as the belief in a fundamental enmity between people, as a 'state of nature' or a generalised 'war of all against all' that emerges "in opposition to the optimistic visions stemming from the Enlightenment (the Marxist visions included)" (2015: 16). It is staggering to see just how much critical social theory today has uncritically accepted the pessimism of the Hobbesian narrative, presuming that the only possible response to structural violence is a kind of homologous counter-violence. Balibar is critical of this account, not because it can't conceive of a way out of violence but because it transcendentalises violence by rendering it an anthropological constant. In this hyper-structural account of violence, which always already precedes politics, there is little room for historical specificity or variation.

Balibar juxtaposes this Hobbesianism with the more dialectical and complex role that violence plays in Hegel's philosophy of history. For Hegel, the violence that we find between groups and communities or between the monarch and his subjects is gradually sublated or absorbed into a positive force, the force of the

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<sup>22</sup> The idea of absolute enmity as the true moment of politics, which goes back to Thomas Hobbes and is further developed by Carl von Clausewitz and Carl Schmitt is clearly visible today in Giorgio Agamben and Tiqqun's treatments of civil war. Also for Alain Badiou, the true moment of politics requires a foundational distinction between friend and enemy. See Agamben, G. (2015). Stasis: civil war as a political paradigm. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press.; Tiqqun (Collective) (2010). Introduction to civil war. Los Angeles; Cambridge, Mass., Semiotext(e).; Badiou, A. (2009). Logics of worlds: being and event, 2. London; New York, Continuum. Note the affinity between the Hobbesian dictum of war as the basis of society and the cybernetic paradigm discussed above that similarly reduces all social action to strategies and tactics within a given system.

institution, which then shapes social life in the lawful and peaceful manner of the *Rechtsstaat* (state of law). In Balibar's words:

Hegel's approach is not based on the return of the repressed and its prevention but on the speculative or dialectical identity between destruction and construction, or violence and the institution [...] Hegel's thesis is not that the construction of the state of law suppresses violence or represses it to the unconscious level of politics and social life. His thesis is that the state tends to bring about the conversion of violence and attains its internal goal by effecting this conversion in history (2015: 32-33).

Hegel thus envisions a teleological goal to the political process. Setting out from the martial, Hobbesian master/slave dialectic, he demonstrates the historical process of conversion, through which violence is annulled, kept and transformed from a negative force to the civilising element of the institution. Balibar is critical of this account. Not only politically, because it presumes a teleological goal to the historical process that is coded as white and Western but also theoretically, because he believes that there are some forms of violence that cannot be productively converted. It is Balibar's subsequent discussion of Marx that gives us the key to a properly historical understanding of structural violence and to its possible antidote.

At the outset, Balibar emphasises that Marx, truly a man of his time, could never properly detach himself from the Hegelian belief in an ultimate conversion of violence into 'world spirit' that for him became the 'classless society'. Not focusing much on the utopian dimension of his *oeuvre*, Balibar argues that Marx offered us the first *phenomenology of violence* that accounts simultaneously for the historical emergence of structural violence under capitalism as well as for the co-emergent class struggle, or capacity to resist. For Balibar:

The stakes of this phenomenology can be stated in a sentence: to think conjointly two phenomena that Marx attempts to bring together in one and the same contradictory unity: capitalism's destructive face, the explosion of violence that accompanies both its emergence as a new mode of production and also its historical expansion across the globe, and the aspect of it that seems progressive and constructive, the development of the socialization of labor (2015: 81).

In this co-emergence of structural violence and a resistant potential, we have precisely the element that interests us in our attempt to salvage what we can from vulnerability studies, while resolutely rejecting disaster adaptation and resilience as viable political options. For Balibar, reading Marx, structural violence occurs when humans are dispossessed from their subsistence mode of production and are forced to sell their labour power on the market. It is this reduction of labour to a commodity; a mere 'thing' to be purchased, that constitutes the foundational moment of structural violence from which all other violations result. Balibar is careful to point out however, that in the Marxian account, it is paradoxically this reduction of labour to a commodity that bequeaths onto a person their status as subject or "the owner as a legal person of his body, its physical and intellectual capacities, which can be transferred to capital" (2015: 84). Balibar highlights how, while on the one hand creating the most terrifying institutions of chattel slavery and effecting famine and immiseration, structural violence at the same time immanently produces the conditions under which it can be contested:

In short, capital produces the new Leviathan, simultaneously "automaton" and "autocrat." But Marx goes still further, for he never believed that the reversal of the anthropological relationship between subject and object resulting from the transformation of labor power into a commodity and from its exploitation could come about automatically, simply by dint of its "form." On the contrary, what interests him is the resistance that it

inevitably engenders, requiring, in its turn, that capital establish repressive or disciplinary means destined to curb or crush resistance. Thus, the class struggle begins as soon as labor power is caught up in the process of its transformation into a commodity (ibid.).

Balibar thus reveals the necessary belonging together of structural violence and resistance as historical phenomena. He gives the example of how in the French Revolution, the promotion of the “Rights of Man” was only possible by reference to a universal legal framework that granted “rights”, which had not been equally granted to everyone. In the same way, Marx argued that the socialisation of labour and its commodification in the factory simultaneously produced the conditions for a class-consciousness to emerge that would challenge capitalist rule all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Balibar further sharpens Marx’ emphasis on resistance, since for him, it is only in the moments of resistance to structural violence that this violence is initially revealed as such:

The notion of resistance is crucial [...] because it evokes the irreducible experience in which a specific form of violence is revealed as such (whether exploitation, inequality, discrimination, or all three at once) and, inseparably, thereby reveals the universal “right” that that violence denies (2015: 5-6).

Where does Balibar’s theory of the co-emergence of structural violence and resistance leave us? We began with New Orleans and Malik Rahim’s story of the unclaimed corpses in the street. Reviewing today’s dominant account of violence, which we located in the evental notion of disaster, a brief history of disaster studies showed how it emerged out of a cybernetic context with the goal of population control. Against the prevailing vulnerability paradigm, we have argued that the framework falls short both analytically and politically, by maintaining an arbitrary separation between norm and exception and by facilitating processes of privatisation and decentralised administration that can be proven to enhance, rather

than remedy structural vulnerability. In opposition to vulnerability studies foreshortened view of violence, we discussed two Marxist accounts of the way that violence operates as a necessary element within developed capitalism. Before characterising the particular form that structural violence and resistance take today, let us ask if the *event* as a temporally circumscribed moment has a place in the Marxian view of disaster.

## 2.7 Event and Social Form

In the following investigation, the only place reserved to the event is that of a vista, an enabling perspective that necessitates a deeper investigation into its underlying ordinariness and conditions of emergence. However, even to speak of the event as an enabling perspective is problematic because this still maintains a separation between normality and exception, however minimal. This problem is outlined by the cultural theorists Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton with regard to police violence against African Americans in the US. Whenever one concentrates on a spectacularly cruel instance of police violence, such as the killing of Michael Brown by the white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, one singles out as exceptional a single event. By rendering this event exceptional however, one legitimises the ordinary structure of the police regime that subjects African Americans to the deepest humiliations on a daily basis. Consequently, when activists campaign for more humane policing strategies, they create a scale of humane-ness that can be differentially applied to policing, instead of critiquing the inherent and constitutive racism of the US police in general. This is how Martinot and Sexton make their claim:

Whenever one attempts to speak about the paradigm of policing, one is forced back into a discussion of particular events – high profile police homicides and their related courtroom battles for instance. The spectacular



event camouflages the operation of police law as contempt, as terror, its occupation of neighbourhoods; the secret of police law is the fact that there is no recourse to the disruption of people's lives by these activities. In fact, to focus on the spectacular event of police violence is to deploy (and thereby affirm) the logic of police profiling itself (2003: 172-173).

The critique of police violence that focuses on the excesses of individual officers therefore is part and parcel of the very structure of police violence that singles out individual criminal acts rather than addressing the structural level of racial domination. By speaking about police excesses, one paradoxically naturalises the institution of the police. However, as Martinot and Sexton recognise, "we can't avoid this logic once we submit to the demand to provide examples and images of the paradigm" (ibid.: 173). This situation presents a real analytic impasse when speaking about disasters. Just like the paradigm of the police, the paradigm of the disaster imposes its own temporal horizon, in which even a structural critique of the conditions that created differential vulnerability for some groups during a disaster leads us back to the disaster as exception. My study accepts this paradox as a necessary constraint under our current epistemic conditions and attempts to deconstruct it as far as possible. It therefore uses individual instances of disaster to address the pressures of structural violence that are operative above and beyond any individual manifestation of calamity.

However, there is something else we can do besides simply accepting the gap between event and structure in the contemporary disaster landscape. Following Fredric Jameson, we can "always historicise" (1981: 9). Since both Žižek's and Balibar's Marxist accounts of embedded or structural violence as well as Martinot and Sexton's black studies spin on the matter seem slightly formalistic and static in their outlook, I suggest coupling them with a historically specific analysis of the way in which contemporary violence is administered in disasters. After this critical

review of the literature, we are now in a position to begin our properly historical exposition.

### **III 1930: Disasters, Natural and Federal**

*It is simply indescribably beautiful here – the way one always imagines the Riviera, and the way it never actually is.*

– Theodor Adorno

#### **3 The Economic Emergency: The New Deal and the Dream of Peaceful Co-Development**

To begin to understand the general shift of reproductive activities from the IMM to the DMM sphere, it is important to cast a brief glance onto the history of US disaster relief in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, before the advent of the 1970s economic crisis, in a different age of boom and bust. How did disaster relief become integrated into the repertoire of IMM activities in the first place and what purpose did this integration serve? After all, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the idea that a strong federal government should provide emergency relief for its people would have seemed like a pipe dream. Taking hurricane reconstruction in the state of Florida as a paradigmatic example, the following section examines the way in which disaster relief shifted from individual state to federal responsibility during the New Deal and in the post-war boom.

I argue that moving disaster aid into the federal realm served two key purposes: On the one hand, it created ample opportunities for employment in an ailing economic environment. On the other hand, it allowed for the extension of infrastructure and real estate development to formerly inaccessible regions of the nation, setting off a huge development boom. This short-lived presence of a strong social-democratic federal state informed the idea of a compromise between the working class and the federal state, culminating in the conviction that the advance of capitalist development was beneficial for organised labour. Disaster aid was thus

instrumental in reconfiguring the relationship between the state and civil society as a union of shared interests that would characterise the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the following chapters, we will see how this dream quickly disintegrated with the advent of the 1970s crisis.

In 1934 the small island of Key West on the southernmost tip of Florida was knee-deep in depression. With some eighty per cent of its 11,600 citizens on welfare benefits, Governor David Sholtz resorted to taking unprecedented action.<sup>23</sup> On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, he declared a state of emergency in Key West and handed all administrative powers to the federal government. In response, Julius F. Stone, a convinced New Dealer and head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration FERA – a forerunner of today's FEMA – set up shop in Key West and began reshaping the destiny of southern Florida. Faced with the choice of relocating the roughly three thousand local families to other parts of the state or providing a large cash donation as poverty relief, he instead decided to put the unemployed Key West residents to work and re-establish their ailing town as a Number One national tourist resort.

In the following months, Key West became the poster child of the American New Deal and living proof of the credo that injecting poverty-stricken areas with generous federal relief could bring stalling economies back onto their feet. Volunteers from across the nation flooded into the area and together with local residents and 1 billion US dollars in emergency budgets,<sup>24</sup> razed derelict buildings to make way for attractive cabanas, renovated parks, planted palm trees and flower beds and restored the city's characteristic architecture. The FERA publicist M. E. Golfond advertised the reconstruction effort to national media and the city quickly

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<sup>23</sup> The following account is loosely based on Gene Burnett's book on the history of Florida. See Burnett, G. M. (1986). Florida's past: people and events that shaped the state. Englewood, Fla., Pineapple Press.

<sup>24</sup> The legal scholar Michele Dauber has traced the way in which under the New Deal, poverty was framed as a contingent 'natural' disaster, rather than as a systemic crisis of capital accumulation. The tactic worked and poverty-stricken areas received generous federal support under the banner of emergency relief. See Dauber, M. L. (2013). The sympathetic state: disaster relief and the origins of the American welfare state. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

reaped the publicity campaign's benefits. As tourist season came around, forty thousand holidaymakers with federally subsidised airfares and ferry rates descended on Key West.<sup>25</sup> More than double the amount of previous years, forcing more established residents like Ernest Hemingway to flee his "St. Tropez of the poor" and settle in Cuba.

### **3.1 The Public-Private Partnership: Disaster Aid and Development**

Florida was not always the sunshine paradise that it represents today. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its main – and modest – income came from tobacco plantations, citrus fruit and other types of tropical agriculture (Revels, 2011: 13). The first visitors to Florida did not come for pleasure but to inhale the state's supposedly salubrious air, said to alleviate the symptoms of tuberculosis (Stronge, 2008: 77-78). According to the historian Tracy Revels, early Florida tourism around the turn of the century lived mainly off the state's reputation for healthy air and clean waters, combined with sporting activities like swimming, fishing or hunting. When the new-built Orange Belt railroad made St. Petersburg on the Gulf Coast widely accessible, the town became the state's first major recreational destination where well-off Midwesterners travelled to enjoy the alleged health benefits of the mild climate (Revels, 2011: 106).

While political theory insists on a rigid distinction between the state sector and the private sector, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, federal involvement often went hand in hand with private corporate interests, as state-planned infrastructure was frequently carried out by corporate subcontractors. The development of Florida is a case in point for these early public private partnerships. Florida experienced the first large extension of its road and highway network between 1911 and 1921,

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<sup>25</sup> Tracy Revels outlines how the extensive federal investment into Key West in particular and Florida tourism generally made Florida the first state to exit the Great Depression. Cf. Revels, T. J. (2011). Sunshine paradise: a history of Florida tourism. Gainesville, University Press of Florida.. pp. 130-31.

courtesy of the federal government's Road Act (1916) and Highway Act (1921). Well-paved highways, connecting Jacksonville and Miami as well as roads linking the Gulf and the Atlantic Coasts brought Florida its first tourism boom in the early 1920's. Particularly the Dixie Highway that connected Florida to Chicago and the Tamiami Trail that accessed the Everglades from Miami and Ft. Myers, provided a fresh influx of visitors from the north, peaking at 2,5 million tourists a year in 1925 (Revels, 2011: 109).

Observing the rapid, state-funded development of the Gulf Coast, the railway tycoons Henry Flagler and Henry Plant began extending the Florida railroad network to access the difficult-to-reach southern and eastern parts of the state. Following the increase in infrastructural development, Flagler and Plant also began building hotels and resorts to cater to the tourists they themselves brought in on their railroads in an early and successful example of vertically integrated service provision. Even if the tourism industry emphasised the 'natural' beauty of the Sunshine State, already by 1920, much of the Florida landscape had been engineered to fit the tourist taste. Miami Beach for instance was created in the summer of 1913, when an investor dredged 1000 acres of mangrove swamp and shipped in six million cubic yards of soil from the Everglades to smooth over the coast and create a white, sandy beach. As the historian Polly Redford writes in *Billion-Dollar Sandbar: A Biography of Miami Beach*, whose title announces a curious meshing of personhood and nature: "The original landscape was erased as if it had never been and a more salable one built in its place" (1970: 73).

Fellow historian Ted Steinberg further outlines how publicly owned coastal areas were gradually sold off to private investors, beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (2000: 49). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the private acquisition of oceanfront property combined with modern technologies of reclaiming marshland through dredging and landfill spurred a real estate boom around coastal properties in Florida, as hotel developers offered ever higher prices for a piece of the tourism pie. In 1925, Carl

Fisher, the developer and creator of Miami Beach, sold properties totalling 23 million US dollars in just one year (ibid.). However, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the infrastructure boom wasn't restricted to the Sunshine State alone. Road and rail networks were expanding all across the continent. We have to contextualise Florida's development in the 1920s within the nationwide extension of infrastructure to get a glimpse of the phenomenon in its historical significance.

### **3.2 Infrastructure and Labour**

Infrastructural development played a pivotal role in the process of American industrialisation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the spread of Fordist factory production would have been unthinkable without the network of roads, highways and freeways that connected distant cities to each other and made remote areas accessible for development. At the same time, as the federal state was expanding its reach to evermore far-flung locations, the wave of infrastructural development set the stage for the brief ascent of organised labour as a driving political force in American everyday life. Pivotal for this dual trajectory was the emergence of the nation state as a prime economic actor. For Endnotes, the development of infrastructure was enabled by a departure from Manchester-style laissez-faire economics that was replaced with the model of a strong state that acted as investor, planner and employer at once. Endnotes emphasise that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Many states dropped pretenses to *Manchestertum*; they began to intervene extensively in national economies. That they did so made it possible to build a vast infrastructure, on which the new industries ran. Here were the canals, railroads and telegraph wires; here, too, the roads, telephone wires, gas lines, plumbing, and electrical grids. At first, this infrastructure was one dimensional: railroads and canals cut through the landscape. Then, it became

increasingly two (or even three) dimensional: networks of roads, electrical grids and radio towers covered entire areas (2015: 109).

As we have seen in the construction of the railway network in Florida, private corporations alone did not have the capacities, skills or funds to carry out these nationwide projects. Because of this reason, the federal state became a kind of master-administrator, employing specialist urban planners and architects *en masse* to lay the foundations for a new and interconnected type of society that had hitherto been primarily locally organised. Endnotes specify that:

This sort of undertaking was often too difficult for capitalists, and not only because of the huge scale of investment required. To build a massive infrastructure requires an army of planners: to promote a wide reach, to prevent wasteful duplication and to decide on industry standards. That meant a growing role for the state, as the only part of society capable of becoming adequate to this task — the task of planning society (2015: 109-110).

However, by placing such great emphasis on the state as the main construction overseer, Endnotes neglect the extent to which infrastructure projects in the US often ran as early public-private partnerships, with the state as planner and developer, who then subcontracted the construction to private corporations. The scale of these projects is staggering, even from today's perspective. By the turn of the century, the US had built a railway network spanning 200,000 miles across the whole North American continent (Easterling, 2014: 152). The extent of these operations meant a huge demand for labour. Besides a war economy where workers are being massively employed in arms manufacturing, infrastructure development requires the highest amount of manual labour possible. The economic historian Alfred Chandler has captured the monstrous reach of the corporations that carried out the construction of the American railroad network:



For several decades the consolidated US railroad systems remained the largest business enterprise in the world [...] In the 1890s a single railroad system managed more men and handled more funds and transactions and used more capital than the most complex of American governmental and military organizations. In 1891 the Pennsylvania Railroad employed over 100,000 workers. In the same year, the total number of soldiers, sailors, and marines in the United States armed services was 39,492 (1977: 94, 204-205).

The new role of the federal state as general planner and mass employer changed previous leftist ideas regarding the handling of this huge bureaucratic formation. Not only did it seem rational that only a strong federal state was able to carry out infrastructure programmes of such magnitude, workers also benefitted massively and directly from these operations because it provided them with the perspective of full employment. This meant that Marx' doctrine that after a revolutionary takeover, the state would simply 'wither away' began to look increasingly implausible. Instead, the idea of socialism as the ultimate planning of society emerged, in which a strong state would administer the workers' interests with no regard for the gains of big business and capital. As Endnotes specify, "Socialism became a vision of the endless extension of the state — from partially to totally planned society" (2015: 111).

For a while, this horizon seemed a possibility. The massive need for labour in key industrial and infrastructural industries swelled the ranks of the unions and in turn created political leverage for wage and benefit negotiations. The consensus was that workers were never better off than under highly developed capitalism. Socialism would therefore have to adopt full industrialisation and full employment as its doctrines of choice, creating a world much like capitalism but with a different set of administrators. In this way, the hitherto endorsed prospect of communism as the abolition of capital *and* the state retreated into the background and was replaced

by social democracy, encapsulated in the idea of an electoral takeover of the state. Backed by strong workers' unions and active in most national parliaments in Europe and North America, social democrats in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century endorsed the general direction of industrialisation but sought to institute reforms that would make the lives of workers more palatable. As the historian Adam Przeworski writes of social democratic parties in the 1920s:

If socialists could not pursue an immediate program of nationalization, what could they do in the meantime? They could and did pursue ad-hoc measures designed to improve the conditions of workers: develop housing programs, introduce minimal wage laws, institute some protection from unemployment [...] Such measures, although they favoured workers, were neither politically unfeasible nor economically shocking – they continued the tradition of the reforms of Bismarck, Disraeli, and Giolitti. These measures modified neither the structure of the economy nor the political balance of forces (1985: 35).

Spurred by their growing size and influence, social democratic parties believed that the electoral goal of an absolute majority of over 50% was achievable in the near future. “It was only a question of time, according to systematic and statistically minded German socialists, before these parties would pass the magic figure of 51 percent of the votes, which in democratic states, must surely be the turning point” (1989: 117), argues the historian Eric Hobsbawm. This optimism was shared nationally in the US as well as locally in Florida. The development of southern Florida and the commercial provision of tourist activities was a double-boon for the federal government *and* the American population. During the 1920s, it provided ample industrial employment in a formerly underdeveloped agricultural region. At the same time, the short-lived economic boom of the twenties saw a rise in real wages and a reduction in working hours for industrial workers, which for the first time instilled the bourgeois idea of the family vacation in the minds of the working class. Simultaneously, Henry Ford's development of the Model T car

ensured that workers could spend their extra income on increasing their mobility and going on holiday, independently of ticket prices and train schedules. As Tracy Revels writes:

People had more leisure time than ever before; even industrial workers were beginning to receive regular vacations. As hours declined, wages rose and by the 1920's [...] the average American's income was approximately twice what he or she needed to meet the basic necessities of life [...] With the automobile came a sense of wanderlust, as thousands of people who had never before travelled took to the road (2011: 103,108).

The combination of increased mobility and more free time enabled the white working and middle classes to engage in new means of vacationing, such as roadside camping, which granted holiday-goers some independence from costly hotels.<sup>26</sup> It was also in the early 1920s that the Miami Chamber of Commerce officially launched a nationwide billboard campaign that advertised Florida's endless summer to frostbitten city-dwellers in the north: "It's always June in Miami", billboards from Chicago to New York read, with scantily-clad Southern Belles driving the point to its northern home.

### **3.3 1920s Hurricane Season**

"Like a vacation, the Florida boom was exciting, memorable and short-lived" (2011: 122), writes Tracy Revels about the beginning of the 1920s hurricane season. On September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1926 the strongest hurricane in Weather Bureau history destroyed much of Florida's precarious coastal development. A storm surge of more than fifteen feet washed away hotels, destroyed boats, left hundreds dead and

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<sup>26</sup> Early Florida tourism took place within a context of rampant racism in which blacks were not allowed to enter the leisure facilities even if they could afford it. The 1920's thus saw the development of a separate African-American tourist industry, particularly at American Beach, north of Jacksonville.

created property damage of over 112 million dollars (ibid.). While the dredging of natural mangrove swamp and the rampant development of seaside properties was arguably good for business, it also destroyed the coast's natural protection against hurricane-induced storm surges. Florida's boosters had taken no precautions against the possibility of hurricanes and their hotels, casinos and resorts – built virtually directly on the beach – did not withstand the winds for a minute. Almost two years later on the dot, in September 1928, another category four storm crashed into West Palm Beach, bringing torrential rainfall that almost instantly flooded large areas around Lake Okeechobee. In a ghostly foreshadowing of Hurricane Katrina, families were stranded on their rooftops or simply washed away by the rising tide. Over 3,500 people never returned home and “the image of bloated bodies, piled like cordwood was a sharp contrast, and a bitter finale, to the scenes of beachfront idylls and freewheeling speculation that had defined Florida in the 1920's” (ibid.: 123).

However, the 1920s tourism finale was not so final after all. When the economic depression added to Florida's misery by also putting those not employed in tourism out of work, the federal government, now under the New Deal, stepped in to rebuild large parts of the destroyed infrastructure. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) rebuilt parks, airports, campgrounds and roads and federal money was used to re-establish the hard-hit Key West as a tourist resort. This extensive investment by the federal government into Florida's tourism sector became one of the staples of Roosevelt's New Deal. It also made Miami the first city to officially exit the Great Depression in 1935 (Revels, 2011: 131).

Continuing the practice of dredging coastal lands that were in reality not more than swamp and marsh, developers in the 1940s built entire new towns on reclaimed land as new tourist destinations. Ted Steinberg outlines how “developers discovered the extreme marketability of dredge-filled marsh, popular among

prospective homeowners seeking easy water access for their boats” (2000: 83). Meanwhile, the federal government sponsored the operation by constructing bridges, roads and paved streets, accessing the new landmass and enabling a steady influx of fresh tourists, eager to spend their extra cash on a sunshine vacation after the austere and restrained wartime years.

A 1959 survey found that Florida received 11.3 million tourists each year, spending a total of 1,77 billion dollars (Revels, 2011: 158). But not everyone who came also left. In the decade from 1950 to 1960, the population of the Florida Keys tripled (Steinberg, 2000: 85), as federally sponsored roads made Florida’s southernmost tip widely accessible. Ted Steinberg confirms that:

The federal government [...] proved itself a zealous supporter of life by the sea. Beginning in the 1930’s and accelerating after the Second World War, the U.S. government subsidized land use on barrier islands by helping bear the costs of constructing causeways, bridges and water supply systems, in addition to providing disaster relief. In response, land speculation and population growth reached new heights (ibid.).

In addition, the 1940s had witnessed a wider shift in the way that disaster relief was administered. Its provision migrated from being a state-run and *ad hoc* aid operation to being a key federal responsibility. This allowed the government to influence much more directly the manner in which relief operations were carried out. It also crucially shifted the budgetary burden from local residents to taxpayers nationwide.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In the context of California, Mike Davis outlines how the federalisation of disaster aid constituted something of a redistribution operation from poor to rich, as poor taxpayers in Detroit were now made to pay for the reconstruction of holiday homes in Malibu. See Davis, M. (1998). Ecology of fear: Los Angeles and the imagination of disaster. New York, Metropolitan Books.

### 3.4 From Proletariat to *Volkspartei*

Meanwhile, after the war, working class parties were forced to reconsider their tactics. The envisioned parliamentary victory had not come to pass. In no country did working class parties ever secure an absolute majority. Far from it, in most European countries, the working class vote never exceeded one third of the electorate. In the US, distinctly socialist parties were even more unsuccessful, often eventually urging their voters to back the Democratic Party, which, while certainly not communist, endorsed redistributive policies, also supported by Socialist parties in Europe. As Adam Przeworski argues:

[The] proletariat was not and never became a numerical majority of voting members of any society. The prediction that the displaced members of the old middle classes would either become proletarians or join the army of the unemployed did not materialize (1985: 23).

The dilemma was that once socialists had embraced the parliamentary system in the hope of one day taking over the government, they were bound by that system and condemned to the teleological hope of the rational advance of the socialisation of labour. On the one hand, as industrialisation and the extension of large-scale infrastructure projects continued undamped after the war, this aim seemed more attainable by the year. At the same time, it seemed illogical that the extension of organised labour did not lead to electoral victory or bring closer the abolition of capitalist labour relations. The truth is that class seemed like an abstract identificatory container for people who often still identified along race and gender or skill and religious lines. Przeworski confirms that particularly at a time of economic prosperity:

Socialism seemed an abstract and an alien ideology in relation to daily experience. It was not apparent to workers that an improvement of their conditions required that the very system of wage labour must be abolished (1985: 22).

Because its goals seemed unreal, socialism was a hard sell for the electorate. Furthermore, socialist parties had extreme race and gender reservations, championing the white, male factory worker as their ideal and denigrating the huge amounts of informal or domestic labour carried out by women and people of colour. The thinness of its own electoral base meant that socialist parties had to look for alliances with broader segments of the population outside of their immediate class base. This explains the diffusion of working class politics into the wider reaches of the popular parties or *Volksparteien* after the Second World War. The only way for working class parties to gain parliamentary power was to not *only* campaign for direct workers' interest but to extend their political constituency by addressing issues that were of wider social relevance or ran tangential to immediate workers' interest. These newly endorsed policies had to be policies that many people could agree on. Classically, they included reforms towards direct rather than indirect taxation, the redistributive extension of social spending towards education, pensions and health care, the facilitating of affordable public transport and housing. However, the adaptation of socialist ideas to a widely conceived politics of 'the people' also meant the complete jettisoning of class as a social determinant and conversely the abandonment of socialism as the overthrow of the parliamentary system. Here's Przeworski:

As class identification becomes less salient, socialist parties lose their unique appeal to workers. Social democratic parties are no longer qualitatively different from other parties; class loyalty is no longer the strongest base of self-identification. Workers see society as composed of individuals; they view themselves as members of collectivities other than class; they behave

politically on the basis of religious, ethnic, regional, or some other affinity (1985: 28).

By creating abundant employment possibilities, the extension of infrastructure projects following natural disasters contributed to an extension of organised labour beyond the Marxist revolutionary model and towards the reformist model of Keynesianism. In this way, federal disaster relief and the centralisation of infrastructural planning created a shared dream of peaceful co-development between labour and capital, which would advance hand in hand into a bright future. Keynesianism was based on the idea that boosting the welfare of workers through direct wage increases as well as investing in other benefits such as a shorter work week, extended vacations and paid holidays would greatly benefit the economy by stimulating consumption. Rather than abolishing the state, as Marx had suggested, Keynesianism was based on the idea that socialist parties could urge the state to impose reforms onto the free market to create a social market economy, in which the welfare of workers and business interests were reconciled in the prosperous consumer. Fundamental to this idea was the development of a public works programme, in which large infrastructure projects were commissioned, overseen and carried out by the federal state.

### **3.5 1960s Hurricane Season**

When the calm weather that followed the hurricanes of the 1920s came to a violent end in the early 1960s, all the necessary federal measures were already in place to restart Florida tourism without much disturbance to business as usual. A 1950 law enabled the President to call a state of emergency and authorise the rebuilding of public infrastructure after a disaster without the necessity of seeking approval by congress. Three years later, in 1953, a law was passed that granted the Small Business Administration (SBA) the powers to give out low-interest loans to



house owners to rebuild after a disaster (Steinberg, 2000: 86). As to the damage done to the beaches by hurricane-induced erosion, this was taken care of by Army Corps of Engineers' Beach Renourishment Program that shipped in sand and soil from the Everglades to replace the drastic loss of Miami Beach's sandy dunes, so as not to upset the tourists and "help wealthy hotel operators" (ibid.: 81).

Hurricanes Donna (1960), Cleo (1964) and Betsy (1965) thus could not do much to disrupt the endless summer of the Sunshine State. On the contrary, Ted Steinberg confirms that after Hurricane Donna:

President Dwight Eisenhower declared the keys a disaster area following the storm, opening the way for millions of dollars to pour in to rebuild bridges, highways and water lines. The SBA meanwhile offered homeowners and businesses low-interest loans (ibid.: 86).

Due to the federalisation of disaster aid, poor taxpayers in Iowa or Kansas now bore the brunt for the reconstruction of Florida, a tourist paradise they would never set foot in. Mike Davis (1998) has outlined how the provision of federal disaster relief was often offset with cuts to other social spending, particularly education. This effectively turned the allocation of aid resources into a redistribution of government money from poor to rich, an element that escapes the attention of classical accounts of disaster capitalism that focus primarily on the role of private investors during and after disasters (Klein, 2007).

In the decades after WWII, the successful makeover of Key West became the template for a new type of disaster relief in Florida, only that this time, the calamity was natural rather than economic. In response to the hurricane wave of the 1960s, federal funds were poured into Florida by the millions to rebuild its destroyed tourist infrastructure, constituting one of the largest disaster aid programmes in US history. Indeed, tourism, both a social and an economic

phenomenon, rose to unimaginable levels after WWII and quickly became a cultural fixture in the imaginary of the American bourgeoisie. In 1949, only four years after the end of the war, the US Department of Commerce established that 62% of all Americans were planning to take a holiday and by 1964, 100,000 tourists a year were coming to Miami on package tours (Revels, 2011: 157). As publicity campaigns savvily advertised Florida as America's No. 1 tourist spot, its hotel tycoons proudly stated "that since WWII, they had constructed more hotels than the rest of the world combined" (ibid.).

Yet, if the government's generosity helped Florida's economy to recover in the short-term, its strategy of subsidising coastal development proved disastrous in the long term. As Florida was entering a relatively calm period of hurricane activity after WWII and with tourist numbers restored to way above their 1920s peak, the speculative and dangerous business of coastal real estate development received a massive boost by continued federal investment into roads, bridges, water and sewage systems that "placed more and more people in harm's way than ever before in the history of the Sunshine State (Steinberg, 2000: 80)". As Steinberg further explains:

The government's willingness to provide such money would turn out to be the start of a steady and monumental transfusion of federal cash for subsidising disaster vulnerability [...] In the postwar period, the federal government emerged as a major player in the political economy of risk (ibid.).

### **3.6 Two Limits to Co-Development**

In summary, there was thus a natural and a social limit to the dream of peaceful co-development between capital and labour that had begun so hopefully

in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Regarding the natural limit, every generous rebuilding of infrastructure post-disaster escalated local communities' vulnerability by creating structures that were increasingly exposed to the vagaries of nature. The way in which disaster aid in Florida was used to render accessible for real estate boosters hitherto undeveloped areas through the dredging of mangrove swamp and the renourishment of beaches was anathema to a sustained effort to diminish disaster vulnerability. The ecologist James O'Connor (1998) calls this the *second contradiction of capitalism*, meaning a conflict between the development of the productive forces on the one hand and the coextensive exploitation of the environment on the other.

Sticking with O'Connor, we can define the social limit to the peaceful co-development between capital and labour as the *first contradiction of capitalism*, or the conflict between the extension of the forces of production and the class relation. Against the dreams of Keynesianism, production did not continue infinitely along with rising wages and continued employment. Instead, beginning as early as 1960, the US economy went into an unarrested decline. As outlined above, there are many explanations for this loss of productive vigour, ranging from a crisis in overproduction (Brenner, 2006) to changes in the demographic composition of Western states (Gonzales, 2011) or the conflict between industrial output and the growth of labour productivity (Endnotes, 2015). For our purposes, it is enough to state that this decline happened, and that it put a definitive end to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century dream of a peaceful co-development between capital and workers. At first, blue collar industrial work was scaled back, as factories in the industrial centres of Detroit or Newark closed down. While the white collar FIRE (Finance, Insurance and Real Estate) sector and the service industry kept growing for a limited period of time, this shift drastically lessened workers' power as traditional models of unionisation and collective decision-making proved difficult to enact. Beginning in the 1980s, white collar employment also began to definitively slow down. This gradually pitted colleague against colleague and worker against worker in the battle for evermore scarce jobs.

As we have seen, the reaction of the US government to the decline in productive power has been a resolute scaling back of social spending in all areas of social life from education to disaster relief, creating a situation of *generalised non-reproduction* (Goldner, 2007), in which diverse forms of reproductive labour are increasingly performed by citizens themselves. We are thus faced with a bad dialectic between the spheres of the state and civil society, in which the state increasingly retreats from providing disaster aid, while including members of civil society in the administration of these services. On the other hand, an increasing percentage of that very same civil society is today excluded from the elementary social participation of wage labour, creating an enduring and persistent social exclusion in the production of surplus populations. While a percentage of this surplus can be put to work as community organisers in the provision of a variety of volunteer-run social services, a large percentage of them remains disenfranchised, the outcome of which is far from clear today.

## IV 1970: The Civilian State of Emergency

*We communists are all dead men on leave. Of this, I am fully aware.*

– Rosa Levine-Mayer

### 4 Crisis, Disaster and Self-Organisation

Let us start then at the transition to the 1970s, at the beginning of the great economic crisis that brought to an end decades of capitalist expansion in the West. In the foregoing discussion of New Orleans, we have defined the primary effect of crisis as an increase in the pressures of daily social reproduction, including food provision, housing, education and child care. As such, crises constitute a zone of conflict, in which gendered and raced battles over state and citizen responsibility, taxation and emergency budgets are waged. This chapter examines one of the most successful attempts of self-organisation around disaster in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Initially campaigning around issues of police violence, the organisation extended its reach by 1969 to encompass social services such as a free breakfast for children programme and free health clinics. In the following, I examine the way in which the Panthers garnered support for their cause. I argue that it was through a distinct discourse of disaster that the party gathered the political backing necessary to build a strong constituency in the United States. It was by casting the structural violence in American everyday life as a disaster that the Panthers were able to extend their political influence well beyond their immediate constituency, becoming a role-model for similar initiatives across the globe.

In contemporary political theory, there are two dominant accounts of the process through which facets of daily life are rendered catastrophic. One focuses on the nation state and its legislative power to declare a state of emergency. The

other focuses on actors from civil society and their power to rival the state's monopoly on emergency declarations. The former is associated with the German legal theorist Carl Schmitt and today constitutes a veritable academic paradigm. The latter is associated with the work of Ole Wæver and the emerging field of security studies. The goal of emergency declarations is markedly different in both accounts. For Schmitt, state-declared emergencies serve to extend the sovereign's control to evermore minute and intimate areas of life, easing and enabling a biopolitical process of administration. Concerning civilian declarations of emergency, security scholars argue that actors use them to strengthen group identity. While state-declared emergencies occupy the legal realm, civilian emergency declarations function on the level of discourse and culture.

Leaving Schmitt's treatment of legislative states of exception by the wayside, the chapter presents the case of the American Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) and its chief-theoretician Huey P. Newton to illuminate the performative dynamics of civilian emergency declarations. Building on Wæver's framework of *securitisation* and recent theorisations of ontological security, I firstly argue that the Black Panthers declared American everyday life a vital threat in order to safeguard an imperilled racial identity and rally for political support based on race. I then present the Black Panthers' turn towards community service as a conundrum that cannot be grasped according to the logic of ontological security. Instead, I suggest that the Panthers' abandonment of armed struggle expressed an abdication of a politics, strictly based on identity. In conclusion, I argue that the case of the Panthers highlights an insufficiency in security studies and analyses that centre on identity and foregrounds the question of *positionality* as a key issue in social reproduction struggles.

## 4.1 The Black Panthers and the Emergency

We, the people, are threatened with genocide because racism and fascism are rampant in this country [...] And the ruling circle in North America is responsible (Newton, Hilliard et al., 2002: 160)

With this, Huey P. Newton, the founder of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense began his speech at Boston College on November 18<sup>th</sup> 1970. In that year, membership in the Black Panther Party peaked with thousands of enrolled members and established offices in over sixty-eight cities across the U.S. Speaking to a numerous crowd on a cold and clear Wednesday,<sup>28</sup> Newton laid out the Panthers' view that African Americans were threatened with extermination inside the United States of America. According to Newton, black Americans were systematically oppressed inside a white supremacist society that had only seemingly broken with slavery. Foreshadowing an argument recently elaborated by Saidiya Hartman (1997), Newton argued that the abolition of slavery in the U.S was not followed by freedom, as officially proclaimed, but merely transcribed the non-subjectivity of the slave into the limited subjecthood of the criminal, the Ghetto-dweller and the pauper.<sup>29</sup> In *The Correct Handling of a Revolution*, written in 1967, Newton specified that the founding of the party was to counter this perceived existential threat:

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<sup>28</sup> The American Records of the Weather Bureau shows a temperature of 40 Fahrenheit (4,4 Celsius) and no rain for this day. See <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/027.html>. (Accessed on 15.11.2014)

<sup>29</sup> In her book *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman reconstructs the transitional period between black slavery and freedom and argues that the legal ascription of subjecthood to blacks served to make African Americans legally accountable for crimes. Against liberal equations of subjecthood and freedom, Hartman argues that full subjectivity only further constrained blacks and controversially calls into question the presumed discontinuity between freedom and slavery.

The main function of the party is to awaken the people and teach them the strategic method of resisting a power structure which is prepared not only to combat with massive brutality the people's resistance but to annihilate totally the Black population (2002: 143).

Newton's large audience testifies that, what had begun as a small grassroots organisation, had by 1970 become a nationwide enterprise with considerable public appeal. While the Civil Rights Movement had through peaceful protest abolished the *de jure* segregation in the American South, *de facto* segregation remained operative in the North and West with permanent racial discrimination by housing associations, banks, employers and trade unions (Bloom and Martin, 2013). According to the historian Donna Murch, Black Panther membership consisted of the sons and daughters of blacks from the South "whose families travelled north and west to escape the southern racial regime, only to be confronted with new forms of segregation and repression" (2010: 6). Contrary to the Civil Rights Movement that had demanded formal citizen rights for America's black population, the Panthers sought to fight the normative stigmatisation of black people that persisted despite formal equality.

Brady Thomas Heiner (2007) summarises the Black Panthers' perception of the threats to their existence as, firstly, the view that blacks constitute an internally colonised community within the U.S and are thus in a situation comparable to other anti-colonial struggles; secondly, that the U.S constitution, its laws and police work as functional agents in the oppression of blacks; thirdly, that within the context of this intra-national colonisation, black self-defence was synonymous with anti-colonial war and, fourthly, that the American prison system played a pivotal role in the criminalisation of black people. Beyond the legal equality granted after desegregation, the Panthers thus diagnosed a structural violence at the heart of American civil society that was set to maintain the normative inferiority of blacks.



Heiner explains how Newton's first theoretical move lay in unmasking the proclaimed peace in 1960s America, that he recast as a struggle over life and death:

Beneath the law and order of the American government, beneath the ostensible peace of the American civil society, a racially fashioned war is being continuously and permanently waged against the black community. The type of peace that American governmental and civil institutions officially prescribe, according to this argument, is not genuinely pacific at all but rather is itself a form of coded warfare (2007: 322).

How should we interpret the Panthers' martial rhetoric? What political purpose did the declaration of a hidden civil war serve? Ole Wæver's theory of securitisation allows us to abstract from the immediate content of Newton's declarations and hone in on its performative function that worked both outwards, in relation to whiteness, as well as inwards, in relation to the African American constituency. In *Securitisation and Desecuritisation* from 1995, Wæver asks "what constitutes a security issue today?" Using speech act theory, Wæver argues that something becomes a security issue by performatively declaring it so. Originally concerned with the integrity of nation states, for Wæver, securitisation practically occurs when a particular issue is taken up and placed within the question of the survival of the state. Traditionally rooted in a state's position of military enmity vis-à-vis another state, contemporary processes of securitisation have expanded to involve issues such as health, drugs, crime or immigration that are all now regularly dramatized as threats to public security. In Wæver's vocabulary, the elevation of an issue into a threat 'securitises' a problem that becomes dramatically framed as a question of life and death. When performed by a sovereign state, the act of securitisation allows the state to defend itself against the harm allegedly caused by the threat:

By uttering ‘security,’ a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it (1995: 55).

When declared through a securitising speech act, securitisation institutes a stark binary between *us* (the community that needs to be protected from a threat) and *them* (the unit representing the threat). Initially, Wæver claims, this practice pertained exclusively to the state. Recently however, the power to securitise has shifted to include actors from civil society who engage in a struggle around political issues that they see as existential threats.<sup>30</sup> Applied to the Black Panthers, we can see that Newton’s insistence on an existential threat to the black community represents precisely such an act of *societal securitisation*. For Wæver, the goal of state as well as societal securitisation processes is to ensure the survival of the unit. While state security safeguards sovereignty, societal security is mobilised to protect the identity of the securitising group:

I have therefore suggested a reconceptualization of the security field in terms of a duality of state security and societal security. State security has sovereignty as its ultimate criterion, and societal security has identity. Both usages imply survival. A state that loses its sovereignty does not survive as a state; a society that loses its identity fears that it will no longer be able to live as itself. There are, then, at the collective level between individual and totality, two organizing centres for the concept of security: state and society (1995: 67).

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<sup>30</sup> Wæver’s theory of securitisation forms an interesting parallel to other attempts to theorise the performative politics of states of exception. While Giorgio Agamben reserves hardly any room for performativity and instead grounds the state of exception in the formalism of the legal realm, Adi Ophir has theorised man-made disasters as resulting from discursive processes of ‘catastrophisation’ that, similarly to Wæver’s theory of securitisation constitute a practice of framing political life as a disaster. For Agamben’s paradigmatic treatment, see Agamben, G. (2005). *State of exception*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. For Ophir’s critique of Agamben, see Ophir, A. (2010). *The Politics of Catastrophization: Emergency and Exception. Contemporary States of Emergency: the Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*. D. Fassin and M. Pandolfi. New York, Zone Books: 59-88.

Wæver's theory of societal security can shed light on emergency politics occurring outside of state sovereignty. The view of securitisation as a performative process allows us to see the power to call an emergency as unequally distributed across the social body. In this process, Wæver recognised a crucial problem that we also encounter with the Black Panthers. While state security has the authority to securitise issues on account of its legal and representative powers, societal security is practically powerless in comparison. It therefore always poses the problem of its own legitimacy. Lacking in representative powers, social groups have to rely on the persuasive power of their speech acts to drive their point home. This fact can help explain the rhetorical vehemence with which Huey Newton made his claims.

Following the securitisation framework, the Panthers were involved in defending their identity against a white supremacist system they perceived as maintaining blacks in a situation of existential inferiority. Their discourse had to be clear and violent to make their message succeed as a speech act, able to institute societal security. Drawing on the linguist J.L. Austin and the philosopher Jacques Derrida, Wæver notes that speech acts are always haunted by the possibility of their failure. They put the speaker at risk, since success at credibly conveying securitisation is never guaranteed:

How does a society speak? Society is different from the state in that it does not have institutions of formal representation. Anyone can speak on behalf of society and claim that a security problem has appeared. Under what circumstances should such claims be taken seriously (1995: 69)?

In the attempt to credibly securitise the issue of race, Newton used evidence from anthropology and sociology to sharpen his argument of a hidden war against blacks. In his autobiography *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton comments on Herbert Hendin's comparative studies of suicide rates in black and white communities

(black suicide rates had doubled in the last ten years while white suicide rates remained level). Drawing on Durkheim's famous study on suicide that had fixed social factors as the root causes for suicide above individual, psychological reasons, Newton uses this argument to claim a hidden deadly mechanism operating at the heart of white America that systematically produced the conditions in which blacks would kill themselves. If, according to Newton, death was what American society had in store for black people, there could be two ways for African Americans to die; either through reactionary suicide or through revolutionary suicide. Reactionary suicide meant giving in to the threatening conditions of the environment by taking one's own life, while revolutionary suicide meant acknowledging the lethal mechanisms that condemned blacks to social and biological death and rebelling against them. While Newton insisted that this exposed the rebel to a likely death at the hands of the prison system or the police, it was in any case preferable to die a revolutionary death than to give in to the system:

Thus it is better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them. Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions [...] Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible. When reactionary forces crush us, we must move against these forces, even at the risk of death (2008: 131).

## **4.2 Revolutionary Suicide**

Following the argument of securitisation, we can trace how the Panthers politicised their everyday as a fight over life and death by proclaiming white America to be structurally genocidal. As a consequence of this martial framework,

the BPP even began to arm itself for fully-fledged war. Heiner comments on the equation of politics and war that was at the heart of Black Panther discourse:

It is precisely on account of this perceived failure of American sovereignty to guarantee and protect black people's very right to live – moreover, on account of its persistent and explicit attack on that right – that the BPP conceived of politics and war as functionally inseparable (2007: 325).

The notorious documentation of Panther members patrolling the streets of Oakland with shotguns poised, pictures of Newton posing on an African throne, spear and rifle in hand as tokens of Black Nationalism and the seizure of Attica prison in New York, where imprisoned Panthers held forty-two prison guards hostage can be seen as evidence for the militant equation of politics and war that dominated a certain strand of Panther ideology. This radicalism found admirers in European intellectuals from Michel Foucault to Gilles Deleuze, who had started theorising politics on the basis of war after the events of May '68 in Paris.<sup>31</sup> Jean Genet, who visited Newton in California defended the Panther leaders' spectacular display of violence with reference to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*:

Wherever they went the Americans were the masters, so the Panthers should do their best to terrorize the masters by the only means available to them. Spectacle. And the spectacle would work because it was the product of despair [...] Did they have any choice? (2003: 99)

The doctrine of revolutionary suicide with which Newton commanded blacks to rather die in battle than keeping an oppressive semblance of peace both confirms and challenges Wæver's insight about securitisation. On the one hand, the Panthers' rhetoric clearly sought to securitise the concept of race in order to build a

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<sup>31</sup> Brady Thomas Heiner claims that Foucault's preoccupation with war in his lecture series "Society Must Be Defended" originated in an exploration of the racial politics of the U.S and especially his knowledge of the Black Panther Party that he gained through Jean Genet.

strong, black constituency against white hegemony. On the other hand, Newton seemed ready to sacrifice the vital integrity of this very same constituency, thus calling into question Wæver's emphasis on securitisation as a means of *survival*. To obtain a more nuanced picture of the performative position of the Black Panthers with regard to the black community, it is necessary to elaborate the issue of securitisation within a wider context of the negotiation of identity that in certain cases can become 'larger than life'.

### **4.3 Ontological Security**

Following Wæver, several theorists working in security studies have elaborated the link between security and identity to shed light on the politics of self-defence. We have seen that for Wæver, the situation of feeling existentially threatened does not need to be imposed from the outside. Issues are performatively elevated to the level of an existential threat by a social group to demarcate the group's identity in relation to its inside as well as its outside. Originally developed by R.D. Laing in the realm of clinical psychiatry and imported into sociology by Anthony Giddens (1991), the concept of ontological security has recently been appropriated by Jennifer Mitzen (2006) and Brent Steele (2008) to contradict the 'survival assumption' that permeates political theory.

The survival assumption – legible in thinkers of the state of exception from Carl Schmitt to Giorgio Agamben but also in Wæver – claims that a political unit's primary goal is necessarily its biological survival. Steele uses Laing's concept of ontological security to argue that it is the preservation of a unit's self-identity, rather than survival, that represents the primary motor of social action. According to Steele, political actors acquire a semi-permanent social identity, related to their own self-image, including the values, morals and behavioural patterns they desire to represent, as well as the expectations the outside world has come to develop in

relation to the unit's identity. An actor's primary political interest is the unperturbed continuation of this identity, as it is this continuity, which for Steele provides a sense of existential safety or ontological security. While Steele initially develops his theory in relation to nation states, Wæver has demonstrated the increasing importance of security concerns to actors from civil society. This is how Steele frames the debate around ontological security:

The central argument [...] is that states pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence [...]. While physical security is (obviously) important to states, ontological security is more important because its fulfilment affirms a state's self-identity (i.e. it affirms not only its physical existence but primarily how a state sees itself and secondarily how it wants to be seen by others) (2008: 2-3).

Steele outlines how political actors have historically defended their self-identity, often to the point of jeopardizing their own physical integrity. His analysis of the Belgian decision to fight the far more powerful German army in WWI serves to exemplify the ontological security framework. According to Steele, Belgium's identity had been internationally ratified as politically neutral. Hence, accepting to align itself with Germany without offering resistance – while providing physical security in the short term – would have compromised Belgium's acquired identity, thereby threatening the nation's sense of ontological security. For Steele, the case of Belgium disproves the established survivalist paradigm. While Belgium's shattering defeat was practically guaranteed from the outset, the small nation still fought to secure its sense of uncompromised self-continuity. We can draw an analogy between Belgium's behaviour in WWI and the Black Panthers' doctrine of revolutionary suicide. While fully aware of being crushed by the US police in cases of armed confrontation, the Panthers still advocated this confrontational fight, not in the hope of any real political gains but in order to secure their self-identity and rally for support as a combatant social group. As Steele specifies:

In such cases a state like Belgium ‘gives practical proof’ that in its consideration self-identity was ‘larger than life.’ The existential angst which befalls all social agents is therefore solved through a painful, costly, and tragic, but also emancipatory, action (2008: 113).

Through the ontological security framework, we can gain a better understanding of the Panthers’ doctrine of revolutionary suicide. Dramatizing a situation of racist marginalisation into a “civil war against blacks” sharpened the antagonism between white hegemony and the black community and thus was likely to guarantee group cohesion among African Americans, resulting in rising party membership. In the words of Steele, it ensured ontological security by stabilising the black community’s sense of self. However, apart from the aggressions of a racist system, the Panthers perceived another threat to their identity, coming from within the African American electorate; namely the promise of formal integration into the American mainstream, embodied by the Civil Rights Movement. For the Panthers, this threatened to assimilate blacks and dissolve their constituency into the wider body politic.

#### **4.4 Peace Anxiety**

Writing on the relation between ontological security and political conflict, the political scientist Bahar Rumelili has presented a binary schema of political identity that we can apply to our case of 1970’s America. For Rumelili, political identity is constructed along a twofold axis. Both inclusively, by a set of practices, behaviours and values “that can possibly be acquired by any state if it fulfils certain criteria (2007: 38)” or essentially, through traits “assumed to be based on some inherent characteristics (ibid.)”. Following this perspective, we can say that prior to desegregation, full American identity was defined in essential terms by white skin



colour and in practice-based terms by a capitalist market economy and the values of democracy, individualism and liberalism. In this context, the Civil Rights Movement demanded the abolition of the essential component of American identity *qua* whiteness and an opening of its parameters to include black people in the practice-based performance of American citizenship. As is well known, white hegemony responded by somewhat attenuating the power of its essential, race-coded identity and admitting blacks that were capitalist, democratic and liberally orientated.

While providing undeniable legal gains for African Americans in the South, from an ontological security perspective, this inclusion was at the same time threatening to black self-identity, as blackness now became integrated into the American mainstream. This inclusion diluted what had counted as black (the opposition to white privilege) and, in the words of Steele and Rumelili, it therefore enhanced black ontological insecurity by rupturing a continuous black identity. After desegregation, the Panthers took on the difficult task of mobilising politically around race issues in a situation of newly granted formal equality. This was a time when many within the black community aligned themselves with the American mainstream in the hope of thereby reaching the end of racism. To safeguard a continuous black identity, able to attract party membership, the Panthers' point of contention had to be that America preserved a disavowed core of essential whiteness that still kept blacks in a situation of radical exclusion.

It is possible that the continuous black identity the Panthers were advocating was to a large extent defined precisely by the struggle against normative whiteness. Rumelili has provided evidence of how identities become problematically attached to conflict. For her, "protracted conflicts and the habits and routines that states have formed around them generate a sense of ontological security" (2014: 3), as the conflict becomes a narrative of the individual actors' sense of self. The possibility of conflict resolution on the other hand induces

ontological insecurity, as it involves actors giving up their well-kept narratives about themselves (as Greek over Turkish or Israeli over Palestinian in Rumelili's examples). Rumelili's research into ontological security can help explain the attachment that political actors form to certain structures of conflict. In our case, it provides an explanation of why the Panthers persisted with their radical politics especially *after* the pacifying gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Following Steele's example with regard to Belgium, it becomes understandable why the Panthers indeed preferred death to the assimilation into an identity that went against their established sense of self.

In conclusion, the ontological security framework is able to explain the dramatic early phase of the Panthers, in which the party endorsed a position of Black Nationalism and revolutionary violence. Through an aggressive political rhetoric, it performatively sharpened the identity distinctions between 'black' and 'white' as well as the 'real' blacks that were opposed to the white mainstream and the 'integrationists' who had abandoned the struggle and assimilated to whiteness. However, the schema doesn't offer an explanation for the Panthers' sudden turn to community service after 1970, when armed resistance and most overt aggression was dropped. I argue that, in order to understand this political change, we need to shift our gaze away from identity and onto the question of *positionality*.

#### **4.5. Community-Building and *Positionality***

While security studies' analysis of the interaction between actors from different identity-groups can provide insights into the Panthers' early position of radical self-defence, the notion of identity-preservation (or ontological security) cannot enlighten us as to why the Panthers suddenly abandoned any talk of blackness in terms of identity. Had they surrendered to the integrationist demands of formal equality? Did they believe they had become a fully integrated part of

American society? I suggest interpreting the change of attitude in the Panthers' politics not as a *giving in* to the reformist aims the Panthers had previously rejected. Instead, I propose to read it as a moment of crisis regarding the very notion of identity; or at least, a budding doubt in the feasibility of claims made on the basis of identity. How did this doubt manifest itself for the Black Panthers?

Newton's gradual distancing from the spectacular and identity-building violence he had endorsed in the 1960's and his turn towards a less overtly confrontational politics of welfare provision can be traced most clearly in his dispute with the Panthers' Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver. While Cleaver wanted to push the Party into full-blown armed warfare, Newton opposed this position. Abandoning his provocations in favour of a more attenuated politics, he argued from 1970 onwards that armed resistance was bound to be overpowered by the military superiority of the American police and that, rather than all-out war, the Panthers should adopt a politics of restrained resistance. In an article from 1967, he claimed:

The Black masses are handling the resistance incorrectly. When the brothers in East Oakland [...] amassed the people in the streets, threw bricks and Molotov cocktails to destroy property and create disruption, they were herded into a small area by the gestapo police and immediately contained by the brutal violence of the oppressor's storm troops. Although this manner of resistance is sporadic, short-lived, and costly, it has been transmitted across the country to all the ghettos of the Black nation (2002: 142).

Instead of paramilitary activities, the BPP began to invest strongly into their so-called Survival Programs, a range of over twenty-four different community service programmes that the party ran free of charge to benefit the black population. The programs included a breakfast-for-schools initiative, in which breakfast was served to children before the start of the school day; health and

dental clinics, where medical services were provided, a sickle-cell anaemia screening program; a buses to prisons service where families were transported to and from prisons to visit their relatives; a clothing program and various cultural activities such as a model school, music, poetry and Black History classes. In a televised interview with William Buckley, Newton explained this shift from an emphasis on armed escalation to an investment in community services:

We realized that it wasn't the principle of revolution or the armed principle of our Party, to take the gun and make the gun the only thing that could fight a revolution. So, it was a strategy that was mistaken [...] The media enjoyed the sensationalism of the gun. In many ways, we set ourselves up for the murder we received [...] We realized that we had to treat the issues that the people were most concerned about (2002: 276).

While Newton still framed the need for the social programmes as stemming from the threat of genocide and the necessity for black survival, he simultaneously highlighted a quality in survival that seems to escape the struggle over life and death through the affective categories of self-respect, dignity and enthusiasm:

A Ten-Point Program is not revolutionary in itself, nor is it reformist. It is a survival program. We, the people, are threatened with genocide because racism and fascism are rampant in this country and throughout the world. And the ruling circle in North America is responsible. We intend to change all of that, and in order to change it, there must be a total transformation. But until we can achieve that total transformation, we must exist. In order to exist, we must survive; therefore, we need a survival kit: the Ten-Point Program. It is necessary for our children to grow up healthy with functional and creative minds [...] Where there is courage, where there is self-respect and dignity, there is a possibility that we can change the conditions and win. This is called *revolutionary enthusiasm* (2002: 160-161).

The Survival Programs were thus destined to elevate the morale of their beneficiaries and make them receptive to the *affect* of revolution. More importantly, they had a strong temporal function, stretching the passive time pending death into the active time of survival, a time of holding out and holding on until the right time for revolution had come. They thereby mark Newton's sustained engagement with what one might call a revolutionary philosophy of time. In the article *On the Defection of Eldridge Cleaver*, Newton highlighted that a dispute around time was at the core of his disagreement with Cleaver. While Cleaver "ordered everyone into the streets tomorrow" (2002: 207), Newton knew that "a spontaneous revolution is a fantasy" (ibid.). Rather than provoking a revolutionary conflict in the here-and-now, the BPP's inflection around 1970 inaugurated a sustained investment into resistance and survival. Writing on the differentiation between resistance and revolution, the philosopher Howard Caygill comments on the temporal difference between a revolutionary acceleration of time and the prolonged effort to extend the capacity to resist:

A capacity is precisely a prolongation in time – thus, the struggle for resistance occupies an extended time horizon, unlike the revolutionary bid for power which thrives on the acceleration of time (2013: 10).

The Panthers' Survival Programs exemplify this marked shift from a politics of escalation to a sustained politics of survival. Investing into the physical wellbeing of the people as well as into their cultural education, they opened a sheltered space where the black community could exist outside the immediate pressures of direct confrontation and struggle. Crucially, and signalling Newton's distance from the earlier endorsement of Black Nationalism, the Panthers ceased campaigning around issues of an essential black identity. Instead, their Survival Programs carved out a niche of life that for a time withstood the FBI's counter-intelligence operations of defamation and criminalisation (COINTELPRO). During this time, Newton

carefully guarded against advocating the revolution *now*, while promoting the belief in the longevity and eventual triumph of the movement in the face of likely death:

I have no doubt that the revolution will triumph. The people of the world will prevail, seize power, seize the means of production, and wipe out racism, capitalism, reactionary inter-communalism – reactionary suicide. The people will win a new world (2008: 132).

With its substitution of ‘Black’ with ‘the people of the world’ this statement is miles away from the neatly circumscribed black revolutionary identity the Panthers had endorsed earlier. Rather than antagonistically building a strong identity around blackness (or black ontological security), I argue that Newton here performs a departure from the possibility of a positive black ontology. Instead of a struggle around the relative security or insecurity of an ontological position, around what Martin Heidegger would call ‘the ontic’, we are here dealing with *ontological* insecurity in the strong sense; with an insecurity about the viability of ontic identity.<sup>32</sup> Formalising this doubt regarding identity politics, recent work in Black studies has demonstrated that ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’ are social *positions* before they become invested as *identities* (Patterson, 1982, Hartman, 1997, Sexton, 2008). Writing on the structural relations between whites and blacks since the time of the slave trade, the cultural theorist Frank Wilderson has argued for an understanding of slavery and segregation as relations of formal domination of one entity (Humans) over a subjugated entity (Slaves). Rather than seeing this conflict as a clash between competing identity narratives, Wilderson recasts it as a struggle

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<sup>32</sup> With the concept of ‘ontological difference’, Martin Heidegger distinguished between the realm of empirical beings or *Seiende* and the domain of being itself, or *Sein*. For Heidegger the sensory reality that offers itself to our experience is the realm of the ontic (*Seiendes*) whereas the foundation, origin or cause of this reality is the ontological (*Sein*) that transcends the ontic and escapes our perception. Applied to politics, the ontic is the empirical reality of constituted identities whereas the ontological is the existential, performative and symbolic, operation through which these identities are differentially constituted in the first place. Heidegger critiques Western metaphysics for always having sought to ground the ontic in a firm ontological principle such as substance, spirit or essence. For Heidegger, metaphysics has thereby failed to recognise the performative dimension of its own grounding operation. For Heidegger’s discussion, see Heidegger, M. (1991). *The Principle of Reason*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

around structural domination, regardless of identity. For Wilderson, arguing in Kantian terms, the slave relation forms the condition of possibility for ‘black’ and ‘white’ to emerge as identities in the first place. Wilderson justifies this structuralist view as with recourse to the key categories of Marxism:

I argue that ‘Savage’, Human and Slave should be theorized in the way we theorize worker and capitalist as positions first and identities second, or as we theorise capitalism as a paradigm, rather than as an experience (2010: 24).

What is at stake here is the difference between fully constituted identities that can be remade or defended at will and the pre-identitarian formal relationality that guarantees the reproduction of systems of power and of domination. Wilderson calls this the *structural positionality* that social actors are born into, and Marx’ famous insight about men existing not under “self-selected circumstances but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past (1964: 15)” might have served as his model here. How does the shift from *identity* to *positionality* change the viewpoint on the Black Panthers?

#### **4.6 Negotiating Stigma and *Ontological* Insecurity**

If we abstract from identity and examine the social position of the Panthers vis-à-vis white hegemony as well as the integrationist black mainstream, we gain a more flexible understanding of the shift in the Panthers’ politics away from identity and towards welfare provision. Contrary to identity, the category of stigma is a normative attribution of inferiority that highlights a power relation, in which the stigmatised appear as *pure negativity* with regard to the ‘normal’. Rebecca Adler-Nissen has developed a framework that combines Ervin Goffman’s theory of stigma with questions of ontological security. She both reflects and contests Rumelili’s differentiation between inclusive and exclusive identity aspects by arguing that stigmatisation, i.e. the normative judgement of behaviours as “deviant”

or “morally polluted” easily persists even after successful behavioural adjustment. This explains why, after the Civil Rights Movement the stigma of blackness persisted, despite formal integration into behavioural American-ness. Adler-Nissen insists that stigmatisation always induces a binary between “us” and “them” at the expense of the stigmatised, who are deemed less human or often entirely un-human:

A third feature of stigma imposition occurs when social labels connote a separation of ‘us’ from ‘them’. The ‘us’ and ‘them’ designation in the stigmatization process implies that the labeled group is slightly less human, or, in extreme cases, not human at all (2014: 147).

This emphasis on the ‘inhumanity’ of the stigmatised provides another argument for the Panthers’ sudden doubt in identity as a political category. Applied to the black case, we can see that in conditions of structural inferiority (or structural stigma), there is no aspect of identity that can be positively invested in the hope of successful de-stigmatisation. Wilderson reflects this point when he asks: “What is a Black? A subject? An object? A former slave? A slave? The relational status, or lack thereof of black ~~subjectivity~~ (subjectivity under erasure) haunts Black studies as a field just as it haunts the socius” (2014: xi). The problem of investing in an identity that is constituted as negative with regard to the norm has also been elaborated in a number of contemporary critiques of identity politics. The bottom line of these critiques is that, if identities are constituted oppositionally in relation to a normative Other, then reclaiming a stigmatised identity in the hope of normative recognition only reinforces the oppressive hierarchy that instituted the stigma in the first place. The stigmatised might be able to change minimally the valence of their social position but they do not enable the conditions for a non-stigmatising sociality to emerge. Because of this, the philosopher Wendy Brown has framed identity politics as a struggle for the recognition of our ‘wounded attachments’, that masochistically strengthens the system it is trying to fight:



Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future—for itself or others—that triumphs over this pain (1995: 74).

This doubt concerning identity can serve as an explanation for the Black Panthers' change of heart regarding the former endorsement of identity-building violence. Apart from laying down their weapons, the Panthers also began to form alliances with diverse women's movements as well as gay rights activists and other formerly rejected marginalised groups, in the spirit of intersectional struggles that are defined by their social position, rather than by their identity. The Panthers realised that the stigma placed on them put into question the very idea of their humanity. Foreshadowing recent work in Black studies, their position expressed the extreme exclusion of existing as the negative pole of the ontological plenitude of whiteness (expressed as having an identity, a subjectivity, a body, a soul). This ontologically thin ground meant that there was indeed no identity left that could be positively invested. I have argued that the Panthers' turn towards community services testify to this shift in perspective without resolving it. Contrary to the Panthers' beginnings, these strategies represent a much more minimal position that remained invested in blackness as a negative position with regard to whiteness. Rather than bolstering this marginalised identity through armed escalation, the Panthers now acknowledged it as a *position* whose occupants' lives were threatened and deserved extensive care.

#### **4.7 Politicisation and The End of Identity**

In their attempt to sustain the lives of their immediate constituency as well as those of their allies, the Black Panthers' survival programmes point towards a

horizon beyond identity that severs its “wounded attachments” to identitarian integration. Indeed, rather than campaigning for integration, the party’s community programmes were aimed at establishing a veritable autonomous community in the United States, understood as a parallel social organisation, in which goods, services and care are distributed at a mass level in a more equitable and just way. In a fundamental sense, the Panthers’ community programmes present an act of vehement politicisation, in which formerly non-political activities, such as food provision, childcare and health care become racialised political battlefields of social reproduction.

In two recently published lectures, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has described such a politicisation of the private as the essence of civil war.<sup>33</sup> Agamben positions civil war as structurally similar to the state of exception, as a limit-concept, in which the boundaries between the political and the unpolitical, between the political *polis* and the private *oikos* become blurred and the two become indistinguishable. Engaging with the historian Nicole Loraux’ account of civil war or *stasis*, Agamben describes how for Loraux, civil war is a particular type of strife, since it emerges within the community, rather than intruding from the outside. Loraux argues that the possibility of civil war contradicts the progressive idea of a definitive overcoming of the private in the political since the private can always reassert its influence. In the words of Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gesellschaft* is made fundamentally impossible by the persistence of *Gemeinschaft*. Agamben takes this argument a step further by showing how, rather than the *oikos* being merely irreducible to the public, civil war creates a situation in which the political cannot be distinguished from the unpolitical, just as during civil strife, the neighbour cannot be distinguished from the enemy:

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<sup>33</sup> Agamben’s theory of civil war goes beyond the strict meaning of civil strife as an antagonism between two belligerent factions of civil society. In its demarcation of a threshold of politicisation, it assumes the meaning of a fundamental political structure, in which the content of politics is decided. War is therefore not to be understood strictly in its meaning of ‘armed warfare’. The politicisations of the unpolitical by the Black Panthers exemplify this structure.

The *stasis* [...] takes place neither in the *oikos* nor in the *polis*, neither in the family nor in the city; rather, it constitutes a zone of indifference between the unpolitical space of the family and the political space of the city. In transgressing this threshold, the *oikos* is politicised; conversely, the *polis* is economised, that is, it is reduced to an *oikos* (2015: 16).

In this sense, the Black Panthers' welfare programmes constitute an instance of civil war in Agamben's sense, since they challenge what counts as political and as domestic in a given situation. The Panthers knew this, as is exemplified in Huey Newton's martial rhetoric. So did the U.S. government, which responded to the Panther's welfare programmes with the utmost violence, targeting Panther members and repressing their political initiatives wherever it could. However, as we will see in the following chapters, the American state soon developed other coping mechanisms beyond military aggression that defused the force of self-organised social reproduction and quickly made it usable for its own purposes. As a consequence, the horizon of *resistant* self-organisation receded after the 1970s. Indeed, in the 1980s and 1990s, the spheres of the state and civil society emerged as complimentary players within a new economy of disaster, both natural and man-made. This new regime would make communities increasingly responsible for managing their own social reproduction under economic duress, while closely policing their initiatives to defuse their critical potential.

## V 1995: Fire to the State and Civil Society

*Along with the classes the state will inevitably fall [...] Society will put the whole machinery of state where it will then belong: into the museum of antiquity, by the side of the spinning-wheel and the bronze axe.*

– Friedrich Engels

### 5 Chicago is Melting

In mid-July 1995, an intense heat wave, carrying the second hottest weather ever locally recorded, hit Chicago.<sup>34</sup> Temperatures climbed to 106 degrees Fahrenheit (41 degrees Celsius) for several days and turned the city into a giant cauldron. Warned of the heat by the media and local politicians, Chicagoans braced themselves and developed coping mechanisms. Kids were shooting water pistols in the streets while their parents sipped cool drinks in the shade. Residents took to the city beaches with as many as 90.000 people filling a crammed downtown beach. Students slept with wet towels as blankets to cool down in their sweltering halls of residence. As cars broke down and trains detached from their moorings, the city traffic ground to a halt. The Chicago Police began watering bridges to prevent the concrete from locking, as the slabs expanded in the heat. Fire fighters hosed down children, stuck in stalled school busses to stop them from fainting, as the city vacillated between frenzy and torpor. Observing the events at the height of the summer, the sociologist Eric Klinenberg noted: “Tuesday, July 12; sunny and still; temperature near 100; heat index 102; the streets ablaze; the air sticky; almost thick enough to chew” (1999: 246).

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<sup>34</sup> The following account is based on the opening pages of Klinenberg, E. (2002). Heat wave : a social autopsy of disaster in Chicago. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Things turned serious as temperatures kept rising throughout the week, with no significant drop during night time. Everyone who owned air conditioning kept it running on full blast, leading to skyrocketing electricity consumption that caused citywide power outages when the electricity provider Commonwealth Edison proved unprepared for such heat. With no air conditioning, apartments heated up quickly, gradually making inside and outside indistinguishable. In desperate search for cooling, teenagers opened fire hydrants with sledgehammers to create makeshift water fountains, temporarily relieving whole neighbourhoods from the heat. Unfortunately for those who stayed inside, the manoeuvre caused the water pressure to drop significantly, resulting in many apartments being cut off from running water for hours. This episode also entailed the first outbursts of violence, as police began to shut down hydrants and issue a fine for everyone caught in the act of cooling. In a doomed attempt to keep the hydrants open, youth in the inner city “showered nine water department trucks with gunfire, bricks or rocks and caused minor injuries to four workers”.<sup>35</sup>

With the power out, residents increasingly fell ill. Hospitals overflowed. Emergency responders sometimes took up to two hours to reach a citizen in need. Often they came too late. Chicagoans began dying by the dozen from heat stroke and from exhaustion. Over the days, the city morgues filled up with hundreds of dead residents piling up in front of the cooling chambers. In a bizarre act of philanthropy, a Chicago trucking company donated a fleet of 48 foot-long meat-packing trucks to provide a temporary storage place for the corpses (Klinenberg, 1999: 250). Chicagoans not working in the medical sector were oblivious to the high death rate but when temperatures dropped, the shocking facts of the disaster that claimed more lives than the Oklahoma City bombing (1995) and Hurricane Andrew (1992) combined became apparent. As Eric Klinenberg recapitulates:

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<sup>35</sup> This episode was reported in *The Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1995, p. (2)5.

By the end of the week [...] few could deny that the city had witnessed a disaster of historical proportion: medical examiners confirmed that over five-hundred Chicagoans had died directly from the heat, public health workers reported over seven-hundred deaths in excess of the weekly average, and hospitals registered thousands of visits for weather-related problems (1999: 240).

Attempting to protect Chicago's public image, politicians and the media played up the 'natural' components of the disaster. As the Democratic Mayor Richard Daley reasoned: "Every day, people die of natural causes. You can't put everything as heat related [...] Then everybody in the summer that dies will die of the weather" (cited in Klinenberg, 1999: 273). Others were not content with this explanation. Arguing that the disproportionate death rate during the Chicago Heat Wave bore social rather than natural causes, the sociologist and Chicago native Eric Klinenberg began looking into the social factors that influenced mortality during the disaster. Aiming to write a *social autopsy* of the events, Klinenberg produced a long article in 1999 and the award-winning monograph *Heat Wave*, published with University of Chicago Press in 2002.<sup>36</sup> Causing a scholarly and public stir, his analysis was the subject of a special issue of *Contemporary Sociology*, featuring a debate between Klinenberg and fellow sociologist Mitchell Duneier on research findings and methodology.

Openly critical and incendiary, Klinenberg's book challenges the mainstream media and the politicians who through their symbolic power and concentrated influence "construct and sustain a depoliticized explanation of the heat wave deaths" (1999: 242). Instead, Klinenberg aims to "offer a loose model for sociologizing, and thereby denaturalizing disasters that are generally constructed according to categories of common sense and classified in a vocabulary that effaces

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<sup>36</sup> Klinenberg's monograph won several awards such as the American Sociological Association Robert Park Book Award, the Urban Affairs Association best book award, the British Sociological Association book prize, the Mirra Komarovsky Book Prize, and an honorable mention for the C. Wright Mills Award.

their social logic” (ibid.). A classical sociologist, Klinenberg follows Émile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu in the attempt to unmask the *social facts* that lie hidden beneath the official narrative of a tragic ‘natural’ disaster. In the vein of the Chicago school of new urban sociology, Klinenberg’s study hones in on the architectural, urbanistic and economic factors that created a disproportionate mortality rate for certain segments of the population. His report put forward a bold hypothesis: Rather than unnaturally hot weather, it was Chicago’s high crime rate that led to excessive vulnerability during the heat wave. The highest amount of heat wave deaths occurred in neighbourhoods replete with violent crime, in which people developed a ‘bunker mentality’ and shored themselves up indoors, a strategy which proved fatal during the hot weather.

Entering the sociological debate laterally and leaving issues of methodological accuracy to the side, I ask what is at stake in connecting inner city crime and disaster vulnerability. I argue that Klinenberg’s singling out of *crime* as a primary risk factor fed into an existing moral panic around crime that characterised 1990s America. Rather than straightforwardly, his account must therefore be read *symptomatically*, as expressing a widespread social fear of urban crime. After critically examining Klinenberg’s account, I will interrogate the notion of vulnerability that undergirds his study and that sees a particular interaction between *the state* and civil society as both the root and the *remedy* in ensuring communities’ capacity to withstand disasters.

## 5.1 Dying Alone

After the heat wave’s uncannily high mortality rate with over 700 excess deaths had been officially confirmed, researchers from a variety of disciplines began investigating the matter. Among the first to address the issue was the epidemiologist Jan Semenza, who looked into the health factors that influenced

vulnerability during the heat wave. Based on the mortality data gathered by the Cook County Medical Examiner's Office that had registered the peak in heat-related deaths, Semenza ran a large-scale statistical analysis to find out which factors influenced heat wave mortality. As is often the case in heat waves, the epidemiologist found that the vast majority of heat wave victims were elderly people. Additionally, Semenza isolated the parameter of 'living alone' as major risk factor. According to Semenza, elderly people who lived alone or rarely left their house were twice as likely to perish during extended heat spells than people who had regular social contact (1996: 86). Additionally, the mortality of African Americans was slightly higher overall than that of whites and Latinos.

In *Heat Wave*, Klinenberg builds on and initially confirms Semenza's findings. Accessing police reports, filed by the officers who retrieved heat wave victims from their homes, Klinenberg notes the frequent mention of victims that "lived alone [or] were recluses" (2002: 55), corroborating old age, social isolation and race as primary risk factors.<sup>37</sup> However, Klinenberg goes on to criticise Semenza's study and suggests enhancing it in a substantial way. While the epidemiologists demonstrated a good grasp of at-risk groups, they failed to provide an analysis of neighbourhood variation within vulnerable groups, thereby omitting relevant social causes for heat wave mortality. While it may be true that the elderly were 'generally' more vulnerable to heat than the young, Klinenberg argues this gives us a falsely homogenous image of vulnerability. Seeking to correct this oversight, Klinenberg proposes a "social-ecological analysis of urban health (2002: 81)" that compares distinct neighbourhood properties such as architecture, crime rate, social composition etc. to gain an insight into "place-based death" (ibid.: 85).

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<sup>37</sup> Drawing on data from the Chicago Department of Public Health, Klinenberg concludes that among a total of 521 directly heat-related deaths, a majority of 256 were African-American, while 252 were white and 9 were Latino. See Klinenberg, E. (1999). "Denaturalizing Disaster: A Social Autopsy of the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave." *Theory and Society* 28(2): 239-295. p. 255.



## 5.2 Down in Lawndale

In order to develop a ‘critical neighbourhood analysis’ of vulnerability that is sensitive to place-specific variations, Klinenberg selects two adjacent neighbourhoods, the predominantly African-American North Lawndale and the predominantly Latino South Lawndale as his investigative sites. Finding them almost identical in their high poverty rate (71% below twice the poverty line in North Lawndale and 62% in South Lawndale) as well as in numbers of seniors living alone, they nevertheless display a stark contrast in heat wave mortality of 19 heat related deaths (North Lawndale) to 3 heat induced deaths (South Lawndale), making them the ideal pair to distil hitherto unrecognised mortality factors. At the outset, Klinenberg emphatically rejects two arguments, often summoned to explain diverging vulnerability patterns during disasters. Firstly, he refutes any ‘racialising’ or ‘culturalising’ explanations of the two Lawndales’ mortality difference. Denouncing that “to date, the most prominent explanations of the variance in death rates between the two areas [...] have focused on the ethnoracial composition of the groups” (2002: 88), Klinenberg reviews the self-flattering argument often heard from his Latino informants that Latinos are better adapted to hot weather due to their subtropical countries of origin; an argument Klinenberg devalues as “rooted in mythology rather than in science” (ibid.: 89).

Secondly, Klinenberg critiques “the prevailing U.S. tradition of thinking about urban poverty [...] which focuses on poor people and their individual characteristics rather than on places and their social ecological features” (ibid.: 91). For Klinenberg, this line of thought – popular among conservative scholars and policymakers – is most apparent in “arguments about the ways in which the practices of poor people contribute to the production of their own depravation” (ibid.). Rooted in bourgeois class and race prejudice, this discourse essentially blames poor people for their own destitution. Tracing the origin of poverty to individual faults such as laziness and lack of discipline, this discourse that shames

welfare beneficiaries and stigmatises the unemployed rejects social causes of poverty, instead preferring individual, psychological explanations for enduring hardship. Having thus rejected any easy cultural or individual explanation of the reproduction of vulnerability, Klinenberg summons his sociological skills and employs an eclectic mixture of interviews, participant-observation and statistical analysis to get behind the Lawndales' surprising death-differential.

Using an urban ecology approach that links the mortality phenomenon to social characteristics in the neighbourhood, Klinenberg firstly observes the architectural and infrastructural degradation of North Lawndale, which he compares to the burgeoning infrastructure of its southern sibling:

It takes only a few minutes of observation in the two community areas [...] to see that the two Lawndales are [...] totally different worlds [...] The physical landscape of North Lawndale's largest thoroughfares and many of its residential streets is dominated by boarded or dilapidated buildings, rickety fast-food joints, closed stores with faded signs, and open lots where tall grass and weeds and broken glass, and illegally dumped refuse give testament to the area's decline (2002: 92).

The story of North Lawndale shares with many other Midwestern working class African-American neighbourhoods after deindustrialisation. When the heavy industry companies Sears and Western Electric moved their headquarters in the 1960s, following the heavy rioting after the assassination of Martin Luther King, the formerly buoyant neighbourhood experienced a rapid growth in unemployment. Unable to find work locally, many residents were forced to move. Together with the 'white flight' that began when black labourers migrated *en masse* northward after the end of segregation, the new wave of black economic refugees seriously decimated the population of North Lawndale, leaving 40% of the neighbourhood's land vacant by 1990 (Klinenberg, 2002: 98). Drawing on

governmental statistics, Klinenberg concludes that the overwhelming cumulative effect of high unemployment, population decline, mass poverty and governmental neglect *is the rise of urban crime*. Citing data from the Chicago Police Department, Klinenberg argues that North Lawndale – despite having a crime rate below the most dangerous Chicago areas – has become increasingly unsafe over the years and is today considered “one of the hottest areas around (ibid.: 99)” by local police with *one* violent crime for every *ten* residents:

A booming informal economy in illicit drugs has replaced the formal commercial economy that once supported the neighbourhood, and the violent conflicts among youth dealers and gang-bangers who battle for territory and market share have made North Lawndale a dangerous region, day and night (ibid.: 98).

### **5.3 The Crime - Vulnerability equation**

Gathering eyewitness accounts of residents reporting that “safety is a major issue” (ibid.: 101), Klinenberg asks members of the community if the increase in violent crime has changed the way they go about their everyday. His informant Darcy Baker who has lived in North Lawndale for over forty years testifies that the social life of the community has indeed been profoundly affected:

If you were standing here [in 1995] you’d see someone selling drugs on every corner ... groups of people ... There were dealers standing in front of your home, hiding drugs in the yard [...] There were bullets coming down our block. You couldn’t sit out any longer. We used to sit outside all night and just talk and do whatever. But that’s changed (ibid.).

Klinenberg's interviewees frequently confirm a strong fear of violent crime. In a bold methodological manoeuvre that has spawned a critical exchange with the sociologist Mitchell Duneier,<sup>38</sup> Klinenberg combines this subjective fear with Semenza's data on senior mortality to posit a causal relation regarding heat wave vulnerability: *It is fear of crime that led to the social isolation of elderly people and ultimately to their death during the heat wave. Elderly people in North Lawndale died in large numbers because they were afraid of violent crime.*

[Crime] undermines the basis for the kinds of collective life that might have protected isolated residents from the heat [...] Living with fear and organising one's routines around it, is a consequence of residing in high-crime areas with violent drug markets in the streets and a degraded public infrastructure. The impact of proximity to violence is particularly acute for the elderly, who are not only susceptible to street crime, but also vulnerable to serious physical injury as a consequence of an attack (2002: 101).

To close the gap between a perceived *fear of crime* and an *actual increase* in crime that may have contributed to the social isolation of seniors, Klinenberg draws on existing police data and on contemporary sociology. In 1995, Chicago ranked fifth of all American cities in aggravated assault and in 1998 it topped the list of U.S homicides (Klinenberg, 2002: 55). Just one week before the heat wave, Chicago experienced a marked homicide spike, with as many as twenty-four people killed in only one week, provoking the Chicago Tribune to quip: "City Murders on

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<sup>38</sup> In a journal article that followed the publication of *Heat Wave*, Mitchell Duneier challenges Klinenberg's diagnosis of disproportionate social isolation among the heat wave victims. Gathering his own data directly among the relatives of the deceased, he finds that in North Lawndale, the vast majority of victims had in fact *not* been socially isolated but were instead living with their family or partners. Duneier faults Klinenberg for falling prey to an 'ecological fallacy' that blindly applies citywide data to particular neighbourhoods, expecting to see the same results. Duneier concludes that thorough this erroneous inference, Klinenberg 'racialises' vulnerability despite his intentions to the contrary. Presuming African-American social networks to be defunct without conducting an on-the-ground analysis, he ends up with conclusions that dangerously approach racial stereotypes. Rather than social isolation due to high crime, Duneier suggests that alcoholism and drug use led to the disproportionately high mortality in North Lawndale. See Duneier, M. (2006). "Ethnography, the Ecological Fallacy, and the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave." *American Sociological Review* 71(4): 679-688. pp. 681-83.

Rise with the Thermometer” (cited in *ibid.*), a journalistic hunch that Klinenberg seeks to confirm sociologically. Reporting that most of the murder victims were concentrated in Chicago’s predominantly African-American South Side, Klinenberg argues:

The same areas produced an inordinate number of heat-wave-related deaths the next week. Though they [the seniors] were unlikely targets for the shootings, older residents of violent areas who refused to leave their homes during the heat wave had reason to be concerned about the risks they faced in the city streets [...] Social avoidance and reclusion have become essential protective strategies for city residents whose concentration in high-crime neighbourhoods places them directly in harm’s way (*ibid.*: 55, 58).

Citing Thompson and Krause’s (1998) report on urban environments and the elderly, Klinenberg suggests that Chicago seniors in high-crime neighbourhoods develop a ‘bunker mentality’, practically living in conditions of ‘self-imposed house arrest’ and only leaving their premises when absolutely necessary. For Klinenberg, this fear of crime led urban seniors to disregard the most elementary precautions during a heat wave. For fear of burglary, seniors kept their doors and windows tightly shut. “In an environment where preying on the elderly is a standard and recurrent practice of neighbourhood deviants” (Klinenberg, 2002: 58), they didn’t seek help for fear of being mugged or assaulted on the street or in public housing corridors.

## **5.4 The Better Sibling**

However the clearest formulation of Klinenberg’s equation between crime and disaster vulnerability appears when he directly contrasts the derelict social networks of North Lawndale with the bustling social life of its southern sibling.

South Lawndale or 'Little Village' experienced a different post-war development than its derelict northern neighbour. Populated by Czechoslovakian and German immigrants around the turn of the century, the community attracted many Latino and Mexican migrants to work the same industrial jobs as blacks did who migrated to North Lawndale. However, the two neighbourhoods were differently subjected to the deindustrialisation that began in the 1960s. While residents in North Lawndale moved out *en masse*, Mexican migrants kept coming to South Lawndale and developed a bustling local service sector. Additionally, home ownership in Little Village was at 36% much higher than in North Lawndale, where it didn't exceed 16%, which further prevented residents from moving out. The population surge, dense inhabitation, large family networks and buoyant local markets create a landscape in strong contrast with Klinenberg's description of North Lawndale:

The empty lots and abandoned buildings so prevalent in the African-American area give way to dense concentrations of busy sidewalks, active commerce and residential buildings packed with more inhabitants than they can hold [...] Whereas the social morphology of North Lawndale undermines the collective life of the area, the material substratum of busy streets, dense residential concentration, proximate family habitation, and booming commerce in Little Village fosters public activity and informal social support among area residents (2002: 109).

Klinenberg describes how the vital social life in Little Village helped produce a very low crime rate, three times lower than that of North Lawndale. The safety of the streets allows for much walking and neighbourly exchange, which helps the elderly stay fit and connected. While there are some local gangs, they mostly stick to themselves. Pro-social behaviour is common, resulting in low fear levels and a high degree of sociality. Klinenberg concludes that because of its low-crime rate, this close-knit neighbourhood was much better equipped to deal with the heat than its high-crime sibling:

In North Lawndale the dangerous ecology of abandoned buildings, open spaces, commercial depletion, violent crime, degraded infrastructure, low population density and family dispersion undermines the viability of public life and the strength of local support systems, rendering older residents particularly vulnerable to isolation. In Little Village though, the busy streets, heavy commercial activity, residential concentration, and relatively low crime promote social contact, collective life and public engagement [...] During the heat wave, these local conditions directly affected residents of the two community areas by constraining (North Lawndale) or creating (in Little Village) the possibility for social contact that helped vulnerable Chicagoans to survive (2002: 91).

Klinenberg's argument is as simple as it is effective. *Vulnerability is produced by the breakdown of the public life of civil society.* This breakdown is triggered by external factors such as governmental neglect and high unemployment but also, significantly, by the internal spread of *urban crime* and its permeation of community life. In Little Village, crime was limited by the existence of healthy social networks and a vibrant public life. In North Lawndale, crime was granted free reign due to a defunct infrastructure, a population without perspective and the absence of a legal job market. Avoiding a classical neoliberal argument, Klinenberg is careful not to blame the rise in crime on the behavioural or psychological motives of individual deviants. Instead, he indicts the city government for producing the conditions in which poor, black residents turn to violent crime, formulating a position characteristic of what I call state-centred vulnerability. Let us look at the causal explanations that Klinenberg provides for the spike in violent crime.

## 5.5 State-Centred Vulnerability

In the first instance, Klinenberg critiques the withdrawal of local and federal government from the provision of welfare services that would have guaranteed poor people a minimum of social security. While there are many explanations for Western governments' drastic cutback of social services since the late 1970's, ranging from the desire to solve a crisis in industrial overproduction (Brenner, 2006, McNally, 2009) to the increasing obsolescence of the Western labour force (Goldner, 2007, Gonzales, 2011), as a fact, the U.S government increasingly reduced social spending to a bare minimum under Ronald Reagan, a trend which was continued in the 1990s by the Clinton administration. Eric Klinenberg sees in this governmental rollback a primary cause for increased poverty, leading to rising insecurity and eventually to a rise in crime:

The city government neglected to design a plan for protecting its residents during the heat wave, but its failure to ensure the welfare of its endangered constituents was also linked to a two-layered political crisis common to local governments since the radical reduction of public services in the 1980s: first, the general poverty of the state because of the massive cutbacks in spending for social services, and second, given this state of destitution, the lack of mechanisms and organizational competency to activate even the paltry programs that remain (1999: 256).

Furthermore, Klinenberg is perceptive in recognising the Clinton administration's pervasive tactic of legitimising real reductions in social spending through a discourse of empowerment. Attempting to wean the poor urban population off government support, the Clinton policymakers promoted the autonomy of poor people to 'make their own choices' among services that were now offered commercially and tailored to individuals (DMM) rather than implemented as blanket state solutions (IMM). Clinton's minister for housing and



urban development (HUD) Henry Cisneros and the HUD chief of staff Bruce Katz describe this as a shift from 'static' government to 'dynamic' markets, where individuals are incentivised to assume responsibility for their own 'welfare profile' (Katz, 2009). Klinenberg is emphatic in his rejection of the empowerment discourse. He recognises that these policy packages' main function is to shift the responsibility for welfare from policymakers to citizens:

As the Mayor's Commission on the heat wave insists [...] residents themselves must take responsibility for securing their own welfare. In most American cities, local governments now claim that their role should no longer be that of universal provider, but of enabler. Appropriating the discourse of empowerment as a moral justification to abandon poor communities, state administrators and politicians, convinced that the best way to protect the poor is to force them to protect themselves, are relinquishing responsibility for many of their services to the people least able to provide them [...] People in need are now considered consumers of public goods in a competitive market rather than citizens entitled to benefits because they are members of a political community (1999: 258).

I suggest calling this a state-centred approach to vulnerability. Its characteristics are neatly exemplified by Klinenberg's position and go as follows: The Chicago heat wave represents a violation of the social contract between the government and its citizens. Years of neoliberal reign have transformed this contract into a business relationship, where 'members of a political community' are increasingly addressed as market consumers. In a classical social-democratic gesture, Klinenberg demands better funded welfare programs, financed through higher taxes on the wealthy. He challenges the Chicago mayor to repair civil society through integrative measures in labour markets, education and crime control. According to the sociologist, one net effect of these pro-social policies that

reinstate responsibility for social reproduction firmly in the IMM sphere would be greatly diminished disaster vulnerability.

What though, if crime and civil society are not as straightforwardly antithetical as Klinenberg presumes? Indeed, what if, rather than signalling the breakdown of civil society, anxiety around crime instead signals the empowerment of civil society that rises up to challenge the social inequalities that the state refuses to remedy? Contrary to Klinenberg's state-centred view of vulnerability, this approach would be civil-society-centred, since it places the power to diminish vulnerability squarely within civil society itself and gives up making demands on the state. Interestingly, this position also emerges in response to a crime wave but draws radically different conclusions from the experience of crime.

## **5.6 The Politics of the Crime Rate**

In their authoritative study on armed street robbery (mugging) in 1970s Britain, Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies propose a radical analytical reversal of the question of crime. Rather than studying crime as a positive 'social fact' with different historical-cultural manifestations, they suggest studying the social configuration under which a particular activity emerges as deviant. In other words, from crime as a unique activity, they shift the analytic terrain onto that activity's conditions of possibility. While Hall's study is different in both time and location to 1990s Chicago, it presents us with a useful methodological toolbox to further examine Klinenberg's connection between high crime and elevated disaster vulnerability as well as spanning the historical arc from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Challenging Klinenberg's faith in police data, Hall's analysis begins with a word of caution about crime statistics. Observing the drastic increase in reported

street muggings and the rising media attention dedicated to this phenomenon in the early 1970s, Hall cautions against taking crime statistics at face value. Because they bracket the social context in which they are produced, crime statistics shouldn't be taken to actually signify an increased threat to public life:

With regard to criminal statistics, these are not – as one might suppose – sure indicators of the volume of crime committed, or very meaningful ones. This has long been recognised even by those who make most use of them, the police themselves. The reasons are not difficult to understand: (1) crime statistics refer only to reported crime: they cannot quantify the 'dark figure'; (2) different areas collate their statistics differently; (3) police sensitisation to, and mobilisation to deal with, selected, 'targeted' crimes increase both the number the police turn up, and the number the public report; (4) public anxiety about particular 'highlighted' offences also leads to 'over-reporting' (2013: 13).

Points three and four are particularly crucial here. Rather than neutrally recording the facts, crime statistics are dynamically compiled in an environment that is already "sensitised" to "highlighted offences", which augments both their statistical capture as well as their presence in the media. Hall thus argues for a pre-existing public sensitivity around crime, which provided fertile soil for the 'mugging epidemic' to break into daylight in the first place. In the case of 1970s Britain, as in 1990s North America, this sensitivity is created by what Hall calls the *rising crime rate equation*, a belief that violent crime is generally on the rise, aided by lax policing strategies that are in dire need of 'toughening up'.<sup>39</sup> Whether one studies Britain's

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<sup>39</sup> Since the shooting of the unarmed black youth Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014, the rising crime equation has been persistently summoned to explain the so-called *Ferguson Effect*. The Ferguson Effect is a hypothesis that argues that police have become reluctant to carry out their work for fear of being caught on camera in the wake of the widespread public criticism of white police violence. This has allegedly led to lax policing of high-crime urban environments, resulting in a rising crime rate in cities such as Chicago, Baltimore and St. Louis. For a best-selling publication that champions this argument see Mac Donald, H. (2016). The war on cops: how the new attack on law and order makes everyone less safe. New York, Encounter Books.

mid-century anxiety around unsafe London underpasses or Klinenberg's fear of "youth dealers and gang-bangers" (2002: 98), it is clear that these phenomena are inserted into an already existing economy of concern that forms the matrix through which any individual act of crime will be interpreted. While certainly acknowledging that *some* London underpasses *are* unsafe and that *some* gangs *do* deal drugs, Hall suggests calling a situation in which the sensitisation to crime hysterically over-determines individual criminal manifestations a *moral panic*.

When the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when 'experts', in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors perceive the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk 'with one voice' of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress sudden and dramatic increases (in numbers involved or events) and 'novelty' [...] then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a moral panic (2013: 20).

Applied to our case, what Klinenberg forgets when diligently citing crime statistics from the Chicago Police Department and deploring the spike in homicides that preceded the Chicago Heat Wave is to ask: Why is America so concerned about rising crime in the 1990s? The result is that the sociologist fails to reflect his own participation in a *moral panic* that characterised the American 1990s just as much as the British 1970s. Indeed, social scientists have long documented the *fear of crime* that dominated American domestic policy in the Clinton Era, particularly in debates on public housing. In the words of urban theorist Owen Hatherley, under 'Thatcher in the UK and Clinton in the US, public housing "emerged as shorthand for general lumpenproletarian venality and violence (2008: 9)" and its residents were blamed for everything from inner-city dereliction to white and middle-class flight from urban centres (Pfeiffer, 2006, Lipman, 2008, Goetz, 2013). In the context of Chicago, Pfeiffer (2006) has shown how a

discourse on urban crime, drug abuse and single motherhood was used to delegitimise Chicago's largest public housing project Cabrini-Green, once home to 15,000 people, until it was ultimately demolished in 2011.<sup>40</sup>

In the context of such symbolic over-determination, where crime flexibly comes to figure an indeterminate series of social ills, Hall suggests a radical shift in perspective away from deviant acts and onto society itself by asking: "Why is society already predisposed to panic about crime (2013: 180)?" Counter to Klinenberg's one-dimensional analysis, this question cannot be answered with reference to social-ecological factors that lead individuals to engage in violent crime. Its scope goes beyond the immediate reality of crime statistics and crime control. Instead, it touches the social core of the state and its management of the population and highlights the role of race within this process. Hall asks further:

If a label precedes a crime, and the judicial arm of the state is increasingly locked in a struggle with a section of the community which then produces its criminals, and the society shows a clear disposition to panic about this aspect of 'rising crime' before it discovers a particular instance of the crime to panic about, then it is necessary to turn first, not to the crime but to what seems most problematic: The reaction to crime (ibid.).

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<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the demolition of 'the most severely distressed' public housing projects was a trademark measure under Clinton's policy package HOPE VI. Arguing that living conditions in public housing actively reproduced poverty due to a lack of aspirational role models as well as crime-detering social control, Clinton's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Henry Cisneros demolished much of the US public housing stock in the 1990s. Seeking to incite former public housing residents to become entrepreneurial citizens, HUD developed a housing voucher scheme through which residents could purchase living space in new mixed-income neighbourhoods. The idea of the mixed-income neighbourhood was based on the behaviourist assumption that through contact to middle-class residents, poor people would become aspirational, responsible and law-abiding. For an introduction to HOPE VI's policies see Cisneros, H. and L. Engdahl (2009). From despair to hope, HOPE VI and the new promise of public housing in America's cities. Washington, D.C, Brookings Institution Press. For a genealogy and a critique of the idea of mixed income housing see Joseph, M. L., R. J. Chaskin and H. S. Webber (2007). "The Theoretical Basis for Addressing Poverty Through Mixed-Income Development." Urban Affairs Review 42(3): 369-409.

## 5.7 Crime and the State

Paraphrasing Hall and shifting the setting from 1970s Britain to 1990s Chicago, we can thus ask: “Why does a society react to [crime] when it does, where it does (2013: 181)?” Why is the US in a moral tail-spin about crime in the mid-1990s? Let us now follow Hall’s argument about why a moral panic around crime arose in 1970s Britain and then contrast this with the situation in Chicago. At the outset of his analysis, Hall is emphatic not to isolate crime as an independent variable but to instead connect it to a broader analysis of social control. Since in a liberal-democratic state, social control is maintained and exercised through the law, any analysis of crime needs to take account of how the law bolsters the state by conceptually framing the categories of legality and legitimacy, crime and deviance. Taking a Marxist approach to legal theory that cannot hide its 1970s tone, Hall rejects the functionalist view of the law as an interconnected system of institutions, instead suggesting to:

Return ‘The Law’ to the classic terrain of the theory of the state. General questions of law and crime, of social control and consent, of legality and illegality, of conformity, legitimation and opposition, belong, and must ultimately be posed unambiguously in relation to, the question of the capitalist state and the class struggle (2013: 193).

With this manoeuvre, Hall repeats Marx’ critique of the Hegelian theory of law, where the legal realm emerges positively and autonomously from within rationally developed civil society. Arguing with Marx that “the anatomy of civil society has to be sought in political economy” (ibid.: 194), Hall tries to locate the legal form of crime and deviance within the wider “mode of production and reproduction of material life” (ibid.).<sup>41</sup> In this way, the classical liberal relation

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<sup>41</sup> The Marxist hunch of an intimate link between the commodity form and the legal form was masterfully developed in the Soviet Union by the legal theorist Evgeny Pashukanis who argued that all legal categories

between the economy and the institutions of civil society, law and the state are reversed: Rather than civil society regulating the economy through state-administered laws, these laws along with the state-form and its civil society emerge as the offshoots of a particular economic relation. What then is the role of the state, as Hall conceives it? Hall's point of departure is the theory of the state, developed by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. For Gramsci, the state's fundamental role is the alignment of civil society and the economic 'base'. Far from an orthodox understanding of Marxism, in which the *base* unilaterally determines the *superstructure*, in Gramsci's account, the superstructural institutions of education, culture and the law enjoy a relative autonomy and are not reducible to simply being agents of capitalism.

Indeed, in their natural state, these different segments of society exist as a non-unified whole, in which parties, organisations and factions all vie for power. Gramsci insists that because of this foundational multiplicity, there never is *one* ruling class or *one* ruling elite. Rather, social domination is achieved in a process he calls *hegemony*, in which different group interests become aligned on one single axis. Since this process is – to use Louis Althusser's phrasing – 'in the last instance' determined at the level of productive relations, Gramsci sees the bourgeoisie as the current organiser of hegemony that coordinates different social interests into a mutually satisfactory, yet entirely capitalist, compromise. Stuart Hall lists the bourgeoisie's concessions to the workers' movement that led to the creation of the welfare state as such a historical compromise.<sup>42</sup> For Gramsci, hegemony can essentially only be achieved through the institution of the modern state:

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can ultimately be thought as real abstractions of the capitalist value form. See Pashukanis, E. B. (2002). The general theory of law & Marxism. New Brunswick, N.J., Transaction Publishers. For a fine contemporary commentary, see Miéville, C. (2005). Between equal rights: a Marxist theory of international law. Leiden; Boston, Brill.

<sup>42</sup> The gradual formal inclusion of formerly oppositional entities such as the working class or the civil rights movement into the ruling alliance's hegemonic regime has indeed helped legitimise the state by preventing any overt reproach of straightforward race or class rule. This is why according to Hall, the state historically tends increasingly towards 'working through consent'.

Hegemony was no automatic condition [...] and its achievement – this universalisation of class interest – *had progressively to pass through the mediation of the state* [...] Only when a dominant class fraction could extend its authority in production through to the spheres of civil society and the state could it be said to exercise hegemony. Through the state, a particular combination of class fractions – an historical bloc – was able to propagate itself throughout society – bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity [...] The state was thus, for him [Gramsci], of crucial importance in the very formation of such ruling alliances (Hall, Critcher et al., 2013: 201).

According to Gramsci, the role of the state is thus to create and maintain the social cohesion called hegemony. Hall emphasises how this is done partly through direct force or coercion in the form of a monopoly on violence but majorly through the creation of consent. Indeed, there is a necessity for citizens to consent to the social order and consent to the state's coercive institutions such as the military and the police. Again, this is not to be thought as a simple, ideological operation but instead as a skilful organisation of difference:

In Gramsci, this management of consent was not conceived simply as a trick or ruse. For capitalist production to expand, it was necessary for the whole terrain of social, moral, and cultural activity to be brought, where possible, within its sway, developed and reshaped to its needs. That is what Gramsci meant by the state 'creating a new type or level of civilization'. The law, he added, 'will be its instrument for this purpose' (Hall, Critcher et al., 2013: 200).

If for Hall, following Gramsci, the law acts as both a guarantor and facilitator of liberal-democratic hegemony, then the particular importance of criminal deviance in his schema becomes apparent. Rather than merely being a violation of society's



shared order of consent, at a deeper level, crime is a sign of a *crisis in hegemony*, of a hiccup in the manufacture and management of consent itself.

## 5.8 The Crisis in Hegemony

For Hall, the 1970s present exactly such a moment in which the post-war consensus of reconstruction and paternalist prosperity enters into crisis. Developing a historical periodisation that runs from 1950 to the moral panic around crime in 1972, Hall outlines the way in which domestic events such as the 1960s student protests and the arrival of Black Power in the UK but also events of international magnitude such as May '68 in France, the opposition to the Vietnam War as well as the West German and Italian terror of the *Red Army Faction* and the *Red Brigades* have destabilised political leadership worldwide, leaving the UK government in a state of perpetual uncertainty. From students to the anti-war counterculture to the Black Panthers, the sequence between 1950 and 1972 was one in which various segments of the population broke the consensus that had characterised the immediate post-war period. For Hall, the cumulative effect of these contestations was a profound *crisis in hegemony* that was soon to force governments to readjust their strategies:

A crisis of hegemony marks a moment of profound rupture in the political and economic life of a society, an accumulation of contradictions. If in moments of 'hegemony' everything works spontaneously so as to sustain and enforce a particular form of class domination while rendering the basis of that social authority invisible through the mechanisms of the production of consent, then moments when the equilibrium of consent is disturbed [...] are moments when the whole basis of political leadership and cultural authority becomes exposed and contested (2013: 214).

Hall sees the moral panic around mugging as fundamentally related to this crisis in hegemony. Indeed, mugging is the mediatic and criminological symptom through which this crisis is lived. Narrating a history of moral concerns since the 1950s on issues such as drug-use, sexual permissiveness and student deviance, Hall describes the accelerated logic in the lead-up to the mugging crisis. In the wake of widespread social contestation, politicians and the media obliquely relate these disparate facts to one another, so that they appear as *one* direct threat to the social order. The effect is one of amplification, in which “not the real events are being described but their threat-potential for society” (2013: 220). In this climate of crisis, the state responds by instituting law and order campaigns, including new laws and policing strategies to quell the ‘danger’. For Hall, a crisis in hegemony thus most often entails “the shift from a ‘consensual’ to a more ‘coercive’ management of the class struggle by the capitalist state (ibid.: 215). The new and increasingly tough handling of criminals as well as tighter drug legislation that followed the mugging ‘epidemic’ show that when consent fails, coercion steps in:

To put it crudely, the ‘moral panic’ appears to us to be one of the principal forms of ideological consciousness by means of which a ‘silent majority’ is won over to the support of increasingly coercive measures on the part of the state, and lend legitimacy to a ‘more than usual’ exercise of control (ibid.: 218).

## **5.9 The Power of Civil Society**

For Hall, moral panics and the heightened concern for deviant behaviour are thus tools of state repression. They are indicative of a shift from a consent-based to a coercion-based form of government. Indeed, they are the very instruments used to legitimise such a shift. Despite the bleak tone of Hall’s analysis that predicts increasing tensions between the police and the black community, his diagnosis thus

remains a hopeful one. It remains hopeful, since behind the heightened anxiety around urban crime and the toughening of 1970s police strategies lies an immanent social contestation of the hegemonic order by a new worldwide constituency, both bourgeois and working-class, both black and white. In Hall's schema, resistance is prior to power, since it is contestation that gives rise to a moral panic around crime in the first place. Who is the agent of this contestation?

Taking leave from orthodox Marxism's insistence on the industrial working-class as the primary revolutionary subject, for Hall, following Gramsci, it is agents from civil society that take over the revolutionary baton. We have seen that Gramsci saw the capitalist state as constituted by two distinct spheres, a 'political society', which rules mainly by force and a 'civil society', which rules through 'the manufacture of consent.' Importantly for Hall and Gramsci, civil society emerges as the preferred site for political struggle. Gramsci envisions civil society as a battleground for a 'war of position', in which workers, the media, cultural producers and activists form a dissenting bloc that departs from the established hegemonic consensus. Gradually and through concerted action, members of civil society develop what Gramsci calls 'counter-hegemony', meaning a heterogeneous unit, so strong as to challenge and eventually replace existing hegemony. As the political philosopher Joseph Buttigieg comments, regarding Gramscian civil society:

His [Gramsci's] purpose is not to repress civil society or to restrict its space but rather to develop a revolutionary strategy (a 'war of position') that would be employed precisely in the arena of civil society, with the aim of disabling the coercive apparatus of the state, gaining access to political power, and creating the conditions that could give rise to a consensual society wherein no individual or group is reduced to a subaltern status (1995: 7).

A resistant civil society is the key to what I call Hall's civil-society-centred approach to vulnerability. Like in Klinenberg, for Hall, it is communities who

suffer directly from the disproportionate vulnerability created for some parts of the population by governmental neglect. *Counter* Klinenberg, however, the seeds for contesting this vulnerability lie not in governmental reform but in direct action by civil society. While the concept of civil society is positively invested both by Hall as well as by Klinenberg, we are now in a position to draw a firm line between the two. For Klinenberg, civil society denotes the social contract between the state and the people. It's the framework that legitimises parliamentary democracy through elections, taxes and social services. For Hall on the other hand, civil society denotes dissent. It is a terrain of struggle that can be occupied and extended towards revolution by a refashioned working class.

For Klinenberg's state-centred model of vulnerability, civil society is positively constituted by a consensus between the state and the population. Crime violates this consensus just as much as the neoliberal rollback of welfare programmes. Hall's model on the other hand starts not from a foundational trust in the state that may be violated but from the antagonistic vibrancy of the community. In his civil-society-centred approach, it is from within a Nietzschean field of forces that a dominant group builds hegemony, partly through coercion and partly through persuasion. Once this group has built an alliance strong enough to universalise its class interest, hegemony is instituted and the social order begins to be perceived as *natural*; with natural winners (the ruling elite) and natural losers (the rest that suffers poverty, marginalisation and disproportionate disaster vulnerability). However, this naturalisation is never quite complete and can be challenged at all times through the same mechanisms that were used in its constitution.

In a disaster situation, the strategies adopted by the state-centred and the civil-society-centred approach to vulnerability are radically different. To be sure, both indict the state for its failures and shortcomings during an emergency but the approaches draw diverging conclusions from this failure. For the state-centred

approach, the state's failure to guarantee protection during a disaster is a violation of the social contract between a government and its people. The adequate response is to allocate blame through the legal apparatus and to campaign for policies that lastingly diminish disaster vulnerability. The state-centred approach is reparative and demands-based. This is clearly visible in Klinenberg's request that welfare programmes be restored unconditionally and that the Chicago authorities be made responsible for what happened during the summer of 1995.<sup>43</sup> The civil-society-centred approach on the other hand has no illusions as to the role of the state. It sees the state as guaranteeing the control of a social elite over a silent majority at the expense of the underprivileged and the less well-off. Rather than demanding reforms from the city government, it organises a new constituency of disaster victims and people in solidarity to help themselves in an emergency. The hope is that this faction can extend their political influence to wider segments of the population to effect long-lasting change. As exemplified by Stuart Hall's analysis, successful community organising has the aspiration to gradually build counter-hegemony with the possibility to challenge state power.

We now come to the task of evaluating both approaches in light of their respective conditions of emergence and in light of today; a task that demands the critical faculty of periodisation to distinguish between the 1970s, the 1990s and the present-day. We started with an examination of Klinenberg's authoritative account of the Chicago heat wave. Drawing on Stuart Hall's analysis of the workings of a moral panic, we have formulated severe doubts as to the accuracy of Klinenberg's singling out of violent crime as a primary vulnerability factor. Following Hall's inversion of the analytic gaze from individual criminals onto the society that produces a proliferation of discourses around crime, we must now ask after the remedy both Klinenberg and Hall propose to limit vulnerability. How do

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<sup>43</sup> Chapters three and four of *Heat Wave* deal extensively with the Chicago city government. In chapter three, Klinenberg critiques the 1990s neoliberal rollback of formerly existing welfare programmes that would have offered protection from the heat. Chapter four shows how the Chicago government tried to defuse taking the blame for their failures in order to safeguard their public image.

Klinenberg's state-centred account of vulnerability and Hall's civil-society-centred account fare in light of their proposed solution attempts?

Firstly, there is something startling in the transition from Hall's 1970s to Klinenberg's 1990s. If we follow Hall in interpreting a moral panic as indicative of a crisis in hegemony, brought about by a resistant civil society, this explanation seems plausible for the 1970s, in which the student and the workers' movements did challenge the status quo from within. The 1990s however did not experience any widespread political mobilisation. Instead, they are often historicised as signalling the free reign of neoliberalism, the advent of military-humanitarian interventions in Ex-Yugoslavia and Rwanda, as well as the planetary victory of capitalism after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Cusset, 2014). How can we regard the actuality of Hall's link between moral panics and political contestation in light of the 1990s?

By all indications there was indeed a moral panic around crime in the 1990s United States. This is confirmed not only by Klinenberg's analysis but also by US policymakers' anxiety around deviance in public housing (Pfeiffer, 2006, Goetz, 2013) as well as by Mayor Rudy Giuliani's 'get-tough' policies on crime in New York City (Glazek, 2012). At the same time, we seem to have a mismatch, in which Hall's connection between moral panics and political contestation does not seem valid. In the following, I argue that crime cannot be reduced to moral panics alone and that Hall's treatment of crime statistics as a governmentally constructed tool, legitimising tough policing is not sufficient to explain the situation in 1990s Chicago. Instead, the long economic crisis that began in the 1970s, and whose repercussions Hall could not anticipate, led many people to actually resort to crime. While moral panics do still play a role and are often summoned to enhance policing, I argue that the 1990s saw a real and structural increase in crime as a

subsistence strategy.<sup>44</sup> Crime in this sense is *not necessarily* related to political contestation, as Hall presumes. However, this does not mean that Klinenberg is correct in equating crime and heat wave mortality.<sup>45</sup> Let us look at the economic trajectory from the 1970s to the 1990s to evaluate Hall's and Klinenberg's responses to vulnerability. In conclusion, we will cast a tentative glance onto the situation today, which will be further examined in the next chapter.

## 5.10 Crisis as the End of State and Civil Society

To make sense of their historical significance, it is important to recognise that both Klinenberg's state-centred approach and Hall's civil-society-centred approach to vulnerability are politically projects of the Left. To evaluate these approaches in the face of disaster means at the same time narrating a history of the Left and its political strategies. To clarify, the idea that demands placed onto the state can force the state into reform is deeply rooted in the history of working-class struggle and takes its paradigmatic shape in the worker's strike. Hegemony too is an updated version of the old Marxist dream of workers' control. From its 19<sup>th</sup> century inception as *seizing the means of production*, this dream underwent a series of modifications, relative to shifts in the mode of production, of which Hardt and Negri's concept of the *Multitude* (2004) might be the latest instalment.

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<sup>44</sup> While I argue that the 'real' crime rate plausibly increased since the 1970s, this does not mean that Hall's reservations regarding crime statistics are invalid. The general bias caused by the cultural sensitisation to crime still holds, making it impossible to actually observe something like a 'real' crime rate that would objectively mirror reality. However, Hall's framing of crime as *exclusively* a matter of anti-insurrectionary obfuscation missed the changes that the economic downturn has wrought particularly on members of the black community. Hall's attempt to protect proletarian populations from the stigma of crime therefore obscures more than it illuminates. However, the Hallsian view of crime as a social construct intended to repress black populations through policing still represents the dominant view today, in the era of Black Lives Matter. For a recent and exemplarily misguided account in this vein, see Camp, J. T. and C. Heatherton (2016). *Policing the planet: why the policing crisis led to black lives matter*. London; New York, Verso.

<sup>45</sup> See Mitchell Duneier's above-mentioned debate with Klinenberg, which addresses the properly methodological shortcomings of the latter's analysis of the heatwave. Duneier extends his critique to accuse Klinenberg of falling prey to racial stereotyping despite his protestations to the contrary. For this extended critique, see Duneier, M. (2004). "Scrutinizing the heat: on ethnic myths and the importance of shoe leather." *Contemporary Sociology* 33(2): 139-150.

Counter Klinenberg and Hall, I argue that both the state-centred notion of political action as well as the civil society-based notion are today in deep crisis. This is because the bases for the restoration of welfare programmes as well as for a counter-hegemonic political takeover are missing. Paradoxically, the success of Gramsci's notion of hegemony is therefore not to be sought in renewed working class power but in working class decline. In the 1960s and 1970s, Gramsci's notion of hegemony and counter-hegemony appealed greatly to the European Left, since it shifted the focus from direct workers' control of the production process to cultural activities as a site of class struggle. In a time of deindustrialisation, when production was increasingly moved offshore and the possibility of full employment retreated into the distance, the concept of hegemony allowed a dispersed and heterogeneous New Left to imagine itself as still meaningfully part of the working class. While Stuart Hall optimistically believed in the constitution of a new and budding revolutionary subject, by the 1990s this old dream of Western Marxism had to be declared dead. The revolutionary subject was nowhere to be found. Neither, however, were strong social-democratic parties with their appeal to state reform.

Recent historicisations of the workers' movement explain its gradual disappearance as the result both of external limits (the downsizing of industrial production in the West) as well as of internal limits (the divisions within the movement itself). In the following, I argue that the external limit dramatically reduced political leverage for state reform, while the internal limit thwarted the aspiration of civil-society-centred counter-hegemony, plunging into deep crisis both Klinenberg's and Hall's paradigmatic accounts of vulnerability.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, industrialisation, the great expansion of factory production, and worldwide infrastructures such as the railway, telegraph and shipping seemed to confirm Marx' hypothesis that because of industrial progress,



the whole world would become working-class, gradually making proletarian political control inevitable. In reality however the real expansion of capitalist production was short-lived. Carried into the 20<sup>th</sup> century largely by the national war economies, it definitively ground to a halt in the 1960s with major industrial cities in the US such as Detroit and Newark laying off workers and downsizing production as early as 1960 (Clover, 2016). Economists such as Robert Brenner (2006) and David McNally (2009) diagnose a ‘long downturn’ and ‘world-slump’ – setting in around 1960 and lasting until today – in which production is first moved offshore and then absolutely scaled back, resulting in skyrocketing unemployment. As the collective Endnotes sum up:

Almost as soon as the old regime was cleared away, the semi-skilled industrial working class stopped growing. It then went into an unarrested decline. At first it did so only relative to the total workforce. But then, in the 1980s and 90s, and in nearly every high-income country, it declined absolutely. As a result, *the industrial workers never made up more than, at most, 40–45 percent of the total workforce*. A growing mass of private service workers expanded alongside the industrial workers and then overtook them as the largest fraction of the workforce [...] All these groups were supposed to fall into the proletariat, but instead the proletariat fell into them (2015: 125).

Coupled with growing automation in key industries such as manufacture that made labour increasingly redundant, this slowdown of the productive economy set a crucial limit to working-class growth. By the 1980s, when the steel mining sector in the US was progressively shut down, the working class constituency had shrunk to a fraction of what it had been in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>46</sup> Under these

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<sup>46</sup> In the 1980s, steel works closed *en masse* across the nation, leading to a ‘steel crisis’. The largest steel manufacturer, U.S. Steel increasingly ‘diversified out’ of steel and began trading in chemicals, oil, gas and real estate. Today, only one third of its sales are in steel alone. For an account of American steel works closures as exemplary of deindustrialisation, see Schulman, L. (1982). "The Decline and Fall of U.S. steel: A case study in de-industrialization." Retrieved 06.12.2016, 06.12.2016, from

circumstances, Klinenberg's suggestion that actors from civil society pressure governments into pro-social reform to restore abolished welfare programmes to the IMM sphere is thwarted by the absolute decline of the working-class that could formerly exercise political leverage through halting production in a factory strike.

Further to these external limits on working class power, the movement suffered the results of its internal exclusions. Born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the model promoted by communist and social democratic parties was the white, male factory worker. While this type of labourer only ever made up a fraction of the total working class, Marxist leaders posited him as a futuristic ideal type, presuming that gradually, differently raced and gendered workers would come to resemble the white male figurehead, by being integrated into the industrial workforce. As the historian Geoff Eley writes: "The working class was identified too easily with the wage relationship in a pure form: the authentic worker, the true proletarian, was the factory worker" (2002: 51). Class belonging was the workers' movement's master narrative, easily overriding other identity aspects such as race and gender, which were seen as redundant and ancillary. However, as Endnotes argue:

Only a portion of the proletariat ever identified with the programme of the workers' movement. That was because many proletarians affirmed their non-class identities — organised primarily around race and nation, but secondarily around gender, skill and trade — above their class identity. They saw their interests as adding up differently, depending on which identity they favoured (2015: 127).

In reality, neither the labour market, nor union organization were particularly inclusive in their outlook. In the US, the automobile workers' unions were openly racist and rejected African American members until the 1960s. Known as the 'last

hired, first fired' policies, this exclusion resulted in black unemployment being between 150 to 400 percent higher than white unemployment in the years following WW II (Clover, 2016: 116). At the same time, on the factory floor, plant managers customarily separated workers according to race to drive down wages. In US automobile plants, blacks were often confined to the foundry, carrying out the most burdensome and dirty work (Endnotes, 2015). While in the post-war period, white workers could thus meaningfully identify with labour as an essential part of their identity, blacks frequently only had tenuous links with waged work and often had to make ends meet through informal labour such as sex work, drug dealing or the reselling of wholesale packaged goods.<sup>47</sup> The shaky relation between African Americans and wage labour *de facto* persisted well after official de-segregation. Today, it is visible in the disproportionately high incarceration rate for black Americans where one in five young black men will at some point in his life spend time behind bars, facing little or no access to the job market upon release (Glazek, 2012).

Reacting to the continued exclusion of blacks from the elementary institutions of civil society, the political theorist Frank Wilderson has launched a trenchant critique of the labour movement from the position of black studies. Arguing that the New Left's fundamental categories of civil society and hegemony are constitutively hostile to blacks, since they rely on the extension of organized labour, from which blacks have been historically excluded, he paints the history of Gramscian Marxism as a white supremacist project, in which the seizure of the means of production by no means liberates us from racism:

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<sup>47</sup> In July 2014, the African American Eric Garner would be arrested and strangled to death by NYPD officers because of being suspected of selling 'loosies'; single cigarettes from illegally imported cartons. For Joshua Clover, this petty crime, although never officially confirmed in the case of Garner is indicative of the informal labour adopted by disenfranchised African Americans for lack of waged work. See Clover, J. (2016). Riot Strike Riot (conference paper). Riot Strike Riot Book Launch. Vancouver, SFU's Vancity Office for Community Engagement .

Violence towards the black body is the precondition for the existence of Gramsci's single entity 'the modern bourgeois-state' with its divided apparatus, political society and civil society [...] In this regard, the hegemonic advances within civil society by the Left hold out no more possibility for black life than the coercive backlash of political society. What many political theorists have either missed or ignored is that the crisis in authority that might take place by way of a Left expansion of civil society, further instantiates, rather than dismantles, the authority of whiteness (2003: 229).

We can thus locate two complimentary tendencies that gradually eroded the power of the working class over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As an *external limit*, production ground to a halt between 1960 and 1973 with the advent of deindustrialisation in the West. While the expanding service sector, as well as governmental bureaucracies, the banking, real estate and insurance sectors slightly cushioned the ensuing mass unemployment, economists argue that these industries are not directly productive of value but merely extend and accelerate its circulation (Brenner, 2006, McNally, 2009, Clover, 2016). As the producers of *fictitious capital* (Goldner, 1999) these non-productive sectors are the only ones to have grown since the 1970s, creating a highly volatile and crisis-prone financial environment with very limited job growth. In this environment of non-production and zero growth, social democracy with its argumentative basis in full employment and strong worker demands on the state, as Klinenberg envisions them, stands no chance. This is proven by the fact that the large social democratic parties in the West have consecutively lost all major elections of the last decades.

This external limit spills over and exacerbates the *internal limits* of the working class movement. As Klinenberg rightly remarks, in times of a crumbling welfare compromise, the Keynesian concessions that were begrudgingly made to non-white working populations in the form of social services are increasingly

withdrawn and replaced with carceral and policing regimes, applied to the so-called surplus populations (those permanently excluded from the job market). In times of crisis, the racialised lines of the labour market and union organisations become clear. In the US, African Americans are the first to be laid off while unions adopt purely defensive strategies, campaigning for industries to stay in business, simply to ensure worker survival (Clover, 2016). While certainly anti-racist in its philosophy, working class politics practically grounds itself in the extension of waged work, a privilege from which non-white workers were often structurally excluded. For political theorist Chris Chen, this points to a real limit to the Gramscian conception of emancipation, seen as a communitarian takeover of the institutions of civil society:

From the point of view of the classical workers' movement, racism was thus seen as an unfortunate impediment to a process of progressive integration into an expanding working class. Yet it is precisely the racialization of the unwaged, unfree, and excluded which constitutes civil society as a space where recognition is bestowed via formal wage contracts and abstract citizenship rights to its members (2013: 212).

We thus have to refine and correct both Klinenberg's state-centred approach to vulnerability as well as Hall's civil-society-centred approach. While we are certainly witnessing new and old forms of political contestation, these do not take the form of either social-democratic pressure on governments or a struggle for hegemony, in which a broad working class alliance is formed across the camps of civil society. Either strategy presupposes a *basis in labour*, which is simply not given today. What is the tendential result of the increasing superfluidity of primarily African American populations to the labour force? Against Hall's framing of black crime as a governmental scarecrow, brandished in front of the eyes of white elites, we should have the courage to admit that the black (and white) crime rate did indeed grow in the 1980s and 1990s. When blacks are perpetually excluded from

waged employment, it is logical that they should turn to illegal economies that are indeed violent and criminal to make a living.

In a recent and painstaking analysis of crime rate developments in the US, Endnotes argue that a rising black crime rate is the direct result of the restructuring of labour markets following the economic crisis:

As the regulation of social relations by the labour market began to break down with the slowing of the economy, proletarians were ejected from the industrial sector, leading to rising unemployment and under-employment, and growth in low-wage services. Populations fled towards suburbs, leaving behind decaying inner cities. This brought a fraying of the social fabric, alongside a fiscal crisis of the state [...] Communities that were supposed to achieve autonomy in the context of the Black Power Movement found themselves riven with crime and desperation (2015: 64-65).

Rather than building autonomous structures, as the Black Panthers envisioned it, black populations found themselves isolated and unemployed with the advent of deindustrialisation. An immediate effect of this growing exclusion from waged employment was the growth of the informal economy, particularly the drug trade. This should not surprise us. If blacks are excluded from the wage-relation, they naturally have to find other ways to survive. The illegal, informal economy is one of these ways. Since the informal drug market is a violent market, this in turn increases the rate of violent crimes committed. We shouldn't be taken aback at the fact that if black unemployment grows, so does the informal economy and therefore the 'real' crime rate. Rather than in psychology or in a failure of revolutionary strategy, the causes for this development are to be found in the historical unfolding of deindustrialisation that overrode the limited gains, won by the Civil Rights Movement. For Endnotes:

The key to this [...] is the simple fact that the historic gains of the Civil Rights Movement failed to improve the lives of most black Americans. Today racial disparities in income, wealth, schooling, unemployment and infant mortality are as high as ever. Segregation persists. Lynching and second class citizenship have been replaced by mass incarceration (2015: 41).

If this diagnosis echoes Klinenberg's findings, regarding heat wave mortality in Chicago, a few words of differentiation are in order. While my analysis makes room for the possibility of an actual increase in violent crime during the 1980s and 1990s, it is questionable that this increase impacted the numbers of seniors dying alone during the heat wave. In his critical exchange with Klinenberg, Mitchell Duneier found that senior citizen isolation was in fact next to non-existent in North Lawndale, while the neighbouring white neighbourhood experienced high degrees of senior isolation (Duneier, 2004, Duneier, 2006). In this regard, we must agree with Duneier and conclude that Klinenberg's extrapolation that seniors in high crime areas are isolated likely stems from racial stereotypes of defunct family ties in the African American community. In reality, there is no reason to believe that the families of people who engage in criminal activities are any less caring, simply because they work in informal economies. Secondly, I thoroughly disagree with Klinenberg's proposition that welfare reform would be a means to repair the broken lives of Chicago's most disenfranchised. The economic crisis has closed the door to this option long ago.

Where does this conclusion leave us? After pitting Klinenberg's and Hall's analyses against the macroeconomic developments in the period from 1970 to 1990, let us now cast a tentative glance onto the present. If both Klinenberg's state-centred account and Hall's civil-society-centred account were based in the notion of class identification, presupposing taut labour markets and a widening of the working class, can we today still think political contestation during disasters, in an age of austerity and unemployment, in which the 'labour metaphysic' (Wright Mills,

1960) has been definitively superseded? While definitely political in nature, the rise in crime cannot serve as an anchor here. The growth of informal and illegal markets is certainly no immediate challenge to the existence of the formal market economy. Since 2008 however, a new and negative form of contestation has arisen that detaches from the category of labour and its reproduction and that wasn't present in the same way in the 1990s. Destructive rather than constructive, this contestation has no demands but also no trust in community solidarity. Against Klinenberg's faith in restoring welfare programmes, this form of politics knows that the governments' coffers are empty and won't be replenished. Rather than organising around the category of the vulnerable that can be made resilient, it organises around its condition of exclusion, thereby reconnecting with the heritage of the Black Panthers. While it is too early to properly evaluate the phenomenon of black race riots in the US, I want to conclude by briefly delineating its contours when applied to disasters.

## **5.11 The End of Identification**

We have sketched how the modifications to the mode of production after the 1970s limited the possibilities for political contestation in its state and civil society forms. While both Klinenberg's demands onto the Chicago government and Hall's notion of hegemony could dominate in an environment when a broad future coalition between the working class and students, and the wider integration of service and creative workers into the ranks of the industrial working class seemed a possibility, the soaring unemployment following deindustrialisation, the increase in private debt, as well as the defeat of organised unions have spelled out the end of these options. Today workers all over the world are more divided than ever, competing for limited jobs with little hope for solidarity. Instead, a growing number of surplus populations are irregularly drafted in and out of contract jobs with no future obligation. What kind of politics is adequate to this context?



In an important contemporary account of political contestation, the paradigm of demands and that of counter-hegemony is replaced with the model of the riot. Joshua Clover's historical analysis of riots differentiates between the riot and the strike as historically specific forms of dissent. While the strike corresponds to a period of economic prosperity, in which employment is high, giving ample leverage for wage negotiations and demands on the state, the riot is a strategy of the economic crisis. Riots emerge in periods of persistent unemployment, when there is much informal labour beyond the wage and no possibility of extending employment. The strike is thus associated with a period of economic production, in which new value is accumulated, whereas the riot corresponds to a period of circulation, in which there is "less value production [and] fewer systemic profits" (Clover, 2016: 23). Drawing on the economist Robert Brenner, Clover characterises our current period since the 1970s as performing such an economic shift from production to circulation:

The current phase in our cycle of accumulation is defined by the collapse of value production at the core of the world-system; it is for this reason that capital's center of gravity shifts toward circulation, borne by the troika of Toyotaization, information technology, and finance (2016: 22-23).

The different strategies of the strike and the riot are tailored to their respective economic situations. During the strike, production is interrupted, creating losses for the owners of the means of production. Workers use this productive hiatus to negotiate higher wages, increased benefits or other circumscribed demands. The riot on the other hand directly interrupts not production but circulation. Rioters block supply chains, occupy buildings and loot department stores in the attempt to cut off the usual distribution of market goods and reroute the flow of commodities into their pockets. The riot is a direct struggle not for access to the wage but for access to subsistence goods:

Riot is in the last instance to be understood as a circulation struggle, of which the price-setting struggle and the surplus rebellion are distinct, if related, forms (Clover, 2016: 28).

In our political vocabulary, the strike is a legal form of protest while the riot is framed as illegal. For Clover, this split between strike and riot, legality and illegality is mirrored within the riot itself. He exemplifies this with regard to the Ferguson Riot of 2014, the longest riot in US history. Following the killing of Michael Brown by the white police officer Darren Wilson, rioting started almost immediately and quickly spread to other American cities. The tactics that were ubiquitously reproduced across the nation included the blocking of highways and thoroughfares and the burning and looting of supermarkets and shopping malls. Clover describes how the Ferguson Riot quickly separated into two vectors, a discursive part that speaks the language of rational demands, public protest and civil disobedience and a 'practical' part that seeks to ameliorate the situation immediately and without appeals to or communication with a public sphere:

The first impulse is toward a kind of populism, an attempt to swell the ranks by mobilizing public sympathies, using to its advantage media coverage and other discursive apparatuses. It is drawn ineluctably toward some version of respectability politics and generally toward the moral suasion of passive civil disobedience and nonviolence in general. It intends to develop a political force, sway opinion, win concessions. Eventually it will be drawn without fail into the electoral arena, subordinated as plank or caucus of party politics [...] The second impulse [...] turns less toward a polity than toward practicalities [...] These practicalities might include looting, controlling space, eroding the power of the police, rendering an area unwelcoming to intruders, and destroying property understood to constitute the rioters' exclusion from the world they see always before them and which they may not enter (2016: 184-185).

Both Klinenberg's state-centred model of vulnerability and Hall's civil-society-centred model belong to the first category of dissent. Historically, it is with this first part that governments negotiate, cut deals, and haggle, eventually convincing the rioters to lay down their weapons. Starting from an illegal uprising, this part ascends into legality by becoming the respectable branch of the riot. In the vocabulary of Klinenberg and Hall, its demands *are heard by the state* or become *perceived as natural*. Not quite a strike, this part nevertheless resembles it by rising into official political legibility. The second part of the riot constitutes its abject component. It is the unruly, resistant element that will not be subdued. Rejecting negotiations with the police or with local politicians, it instead sets about to improve its immediate situation through blockades and through looting. Excluded from its more well-behaved sibling, it transgresses property lines in a desperate outcry that things be different.

This negative component of the riot connects to the history of self-organised social reproduction championed by the Black Panthers and constitutes the riot's direct-action branch. During a disaster it may be more useful in securing resources than the orderly 'discursive part'. During the Ferguson Riot, the liberal press was perpetually outraged at the 'looters', whom it unanimously framed as criminals. However, as the writer Willie Osterweil (2014) remarks, looting has often served as a progressive political tool during race struggles in the United States. For one, it was the 'violent' wing of the Ferguson protests that attracted the media's attention to the phenomenon of police executions and the plight of disenfranchised black rural populations.<sup>48</sup> Second, the act of looting itself, while illicit from a strictly legal standpoint can also be seen as a fruitful subsistence strategy that people,

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<sup>48</sup> Osterweil points out that it was the looting of a Duane Reade store that alerted the media to the killing of the 16 year old Kimani Gray in New York City. In 2013. Furthermore, he critiques the well-kept distinction between non-violent and violent protest and highlights how during the Civil Rights Era, non-violent and violent forms of protest were often enmeshed and achieved their gains together. It was for instance the violent turn during the protests in Birmingham, Alabama that urged John F. Kennedy to call for a civil rights act. See Osterweil, W. (2014). "In Defense of Looting." Retrieved 13.12.2016, from <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/in-defense-of-looting/>.

structurally excluded from wage labour can make use of. Regardless if the loot is shared communally or consumed alone, looting is an immediate tactic of self-help that poor people can use to ameliorate their situation. Osterweil emphasises how during Ferguson, looted goods were used for a variety of purposes from feeding families and helping the elderly to boosting insufficient social security cheques or wearing a new pair of sneakers. For Osterweil, all these uses present “material ways [that] help the community by providing a way for people to solve some of the immediate problems of poverty” (2014: §20) In the US, notions of property are so deeply racialised that the kneejerk moral condemnation of looters must at least be critically examined.

Joshua Clover observes that in the history of riots, the discursive pole always ultimately won out over the ‘practical’ pole, quickly moulding the uprising into a form of official public protest and often winning important concessions from governments. Today, however, this no longer seems like an option. Firstly, governments are less and less willing to negotiate with rioters, preferring instead arrests and incarceration as responses to uprisings. Secondly, even if governments would be more cooperative, in times of profound financial slowdown, they simply cannot meet the demands of protesters because the state is deeply indebted. This brute fact is elaborately ignored by Klinenberg, who tacitly maintains that demands onto the state could be successful. In such an environment, the practical, unruly pole of the riot is likely to win over the discursive pole because no bargaining power can hope to extract concessions from governments and no real gains are on the horizon. For Clover, this marks the essential difference between the Civil Rights era and our times of state-administered austerity:

Since the Civil Rights movement [...] the side of legal frameworks, moral suasion, and respectability politics has effectively hegemonized the debate fairly swiftly after each uprising. This has been the case in no small part because said approach could offer real, if limited, gains. Such outcomes no

longer seem plausible. The success of the discursive strategy was premised upon a certain degree of social wealth, taut labor markets, a continuity of profit worth preserving even if it meant relative sacrifices for capital [...] Just as the U.S. can no longer deliver accumulation at a global level, and thus must order the world-system by coercion rather than consent, the state can no longer provide the kinds of concessions won by the Civil Rights movement, can no longer purchase the social peace. It is all sticks and no carrots (2016: 185-186).

When looking at the history of the US in the last decades, it is clear what form these sticks take. The measure that is increasingly applied to criminals and rioters alike is relentless incarceration. Countering the 1990s spike in crime, the US government set about to reduce the phenomenon of urban crime through increasingly harsh prison sentences. As the writer Christopher Glazek points out, the US “is now the most incarcerated, and the second-most incarcerated country in history, just barely edged out by Stalin’s Soviet Union” (2012: §7). Furthermore, Glazek has shown that the allegedly successful ‘fight against crime’ that has reportedly lowered crime rates in all major American cities since the early 2000s has not actually lowered the absolute number of crimes committed. Instead, it has merely shifted the violence from the street to the prison system. As Glazek demonstrates, the fight against crime was accompanied by a disproportionate rise in the number of prison inmates: “From 1980 to 2007, the number of prisoners in the United States quadrupled to 2.3 million, with an additional 5 million on probation or parole” (ibid.). Whereas violent crime in the streets was contained through heavy policing, violence, especially sexual violence behind bars has gone increasingly unpunished. This is the open secret of low crime rates in urban centres today.

In the logic of incarceration, both crime and rioting are treated as a legal aberrance that has to be policed, controlled and locked up. While Hall framed

political contestation as a more or less organised battle for hegemony by a new political constituency, the increase in riots from Tottenham to Ferguson and Clichy-sous-Bois alerts us to a different and bleaker form of contestation, which I have framed as the revolt of surplus populations that are permanently excluded from the job market as well as from organised labour. Rather than around vulnerability, this contestation is mobilised around structural exclusion. Today, the huge mobilisation of political support from wide segments of the population by the Black Lives Matter initiative in response to the killing of unarmed black men is indicative of the political leverage that riots can exercise. At the moment of writing this, many in the US are campaigning around an extensive police reform that would heighten accountability of police officers for their doings. While police reform cannot solve the problem of surplus populations and the coterminous rise in crime, Black Lives Matter remains an example of the real concessions that riots can force on governments.

While civil society organising was visibly in crisis in the 1990s, Black Lives Matter show that it experienced a resurgence with the turn of the millennium, when new social movements across the globe began to challenge their impoverishment and organise against this predicament. The financial crisis of 2008 set off vehement anti-austerity protests around the world. The Arab Spring sought to shake the shackles of American-backed regional dictators. In its wake, protests quickly spread to the West with the US and US student demonstrations forming the middle-class counterpart to the Tottenham and Oakland riots. In New York, one of the largest recent social movements, Occupy Wall Street successfully took over Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan to protest the federal bail-out of US banks. What was less talked about during this wave of insurrection was that the self-organised social movement would soon become a major force in a new model of disaster relief that would reconfigure the roles of the state and civil society yet again.

## VI 2012: The People do it Better? The Strange Victory of Occupy Sandy

*Somebody's gotta be there when it gets ugly*  
*Somebody's gotta be there when it gets bloody*  
*Somebody's gotta get their hands dirty*  
*Yo, it's a fucked up job but somebody's gotta do it*  
—The Roots

### 6 The Moment of Occupy Sandy

It is Thursday, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012 at St. Jacobi Church in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. It's a bright, dry day.<sup>49</sup> Just one week earlier, Hurricane Sandy made landfall on the East Coast, ravaging everything in its wake. In New York City, thousands of houses are destroyed or flooded. Thousands of households in the low-lying areas of Staten Island, Red Hook and the Rockaways are still without electricity. At St. Jacobi Church, young people with smartphones and walkie-talkies are sifting through piles of donations, sorting canned food, diapers, torches, candles, bed covers and power generators into stacks and loading them onto trucks. A young man with a scruffy-looking beard posts on Facebook: "Attention! If anyone in Rockaway needs to have their basement pumped, please contact Suzanne Hamalak at suzybklyn@aol.com. Her family wants to help and have industrial pumps [...] they will do it for free" (cited in Barr, 2012: §10).<sup>50</sup> The young man is part of Occupy Sandy, Occupy Wall Street's disaster relief agency

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<sup>49</sup> The records show a sunny, dry day with an average temperature of 10 degrees Celsius. See [https://www.wunderground.com/history/airport/KJFK/2012/11/8/DailyHistory.html?req\\_city=&req\\_state=&req\\_statename=&reqdb.zip=&reqdb.magic=&reqdb.wmo=%20\(Accessed%20on%2023.03.2016\)](https://www.wunderground.com/history/airport/KJFK/2012/11/8/DailyHistory.html?req_city=&req_state=&req_statename=&reqdb.zip=&reqdb.magic=&reqdb.wmo=%20(Accessed%20on%2023.03.2016))

<sup>50</sup> Because of the relatively short time that has elapsed since Superstorm Sandy, academic studies on the disaster are still scarce. For this reason and to connect the scholarly discussion to the activist field, the article makes frequent use of news, as well as activist sources.

that set up camp in Brooklyn a day after the hurricane while the Red Cross and FEMA were still struggling to get personnel out to New York's hardest-hit areas.

The most lethal and destructive hurricane of the 2012 Atlantic hurricane season, Sandy's immediate death toll in New York City alone was 97, followed by weeks-long power cuts and billions of dollars in damage (Schmeltz, González et al., 2013: 799). Furthermore, Sandy revealed the staggering vulnerability of low-lying New York City areas that proved incapable of protecting themselves. While low-lying areas are naturally vulnerable to flooding, this vulnerability was exacerbated by drastic economic and social factors. Red Hook, one of the hardest-hit neighbourhoods in Brooklyn, has a 45% poverty rate with soaring levels of asthma and diabetes (Brockwell, Kilminster et al., 2009). While many wealthy Manhattaners and residents on higher ground experienced virtually no disruption to their everyday, the devastation wrought by Sandy on the lower-lying parts of the city was hefty, as the journalist Nick Pinto describes:

Power was out in huge swaths. Flooded tunnels cut off whole regions from the rest of the city. In Lower Manhattan, Red Hook, Coney Island, the Rockaways, and much of Staten Island, everything from electricity to heat to potable water was in short supply. Hospitals were being evacuated after power failures. Bodies drowned in the storm surge were being recovered. The news media began to show the first images of Breezy Point, burned to the ground, and houses up and down the coast torn apart by wind and water (2012: §1).

In ghostly reminiscence of Hurricane Katrina, it quickly became clear that the relief efforts of the Federal Emergency Management Agency FEMA and the Red Cross were inadequate.<sup>51</sup> While FEMA's contingency plans had "anticipated

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<sup>51</sup> This in itself is surprising since the city's exposure to hurricanes has drastically increased over the years. For an informed ecological history of New York City, see Steinberg, T. (2014). Gotham unbound : the ecological history of greater New York. New York, Simon & Schuster.



aftereffects such as electrical fires, flooding, and displacement of populations residing in evacuation zones” (Schmeltz, González et al., 2013: 800), the emergency planners did not expect that the severity of the power cuts would entail a crucial lack of services, affecting everything from clean drinking water and sanitation to food provision. Furthermore, the concentration of emergency personnel onto Lower Manhattan neglected those outlying boroughs that were worst hit by the flooding: “They put a lot of attention to Lower Manhattan when they should have been in Coney Island” (cited in Feeney, 2012: §2), said the exhausted first responder Nick Weissman of Williamsburg.

Part of the failure of the Red Cross and FEMA to adequately address the situation on the ground can be attributed to the emergency managers’ disconnect from local communities. While there existed numerous contingency and hazard adaptation plans such as PlaNYC from the Office of the Mayor and the New York City Hazard Mitigation Plan from the NYC Office for Emergency Management, official schemes tended to be technocratic and did not integrate the local level of community organising.<sup>52</sup> Thus, while FEMA does train community response teams to enact hazard mitigation in their neighbourhoods, these community responders are not actually integrated into adaptation and mitigation planning committees, creating a communication lag between local and administrative levels (Schmeltz, González et al., 2013: 802). In the aftermath of Sandy, this ‘aid gap’, created by the official relief workers, set the stage for the volunteer-based relief work of *Occupy Sandy*, activists from the social movement *Occupy Wall Street* that had occupied Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan to protest American austerity politics a few months prior to Sandy and were now looking for a new mission.

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<sup>52</sup> In addition, the anthropologists Stan and Paul Cox describe how during Hurricane Sandy, the official and intricate contingency plans by New York’s Office of Emergency Management were ignored and the decisive authority relegated directly to the mayor. For the authors, this episode is representative of a larger trend in emergency management that regards official disaster plans as too complex to be followed, preferring to delegate responsibility to non-specialists such as politicians and volunteers. See Cox, S. and P. Cox (2016). *How the World Breaks: Life in Catastrophe’s Path from the Caribbean to Siberia*. New York, The New Press. p. 73.

Tapping into the existing social media network of *Occupy*, the activists quickly set up camp in Brooklyn, utilising Twitter to call for manpower and donations. It soon turned out that social media was quicker and more effective than waiting for official aid workers to be deployed. As Nick Weissman specifies:

Occupy Sandy had Twitter feeds running and a community kitchen set up by Tuesday night after the storm, whereas larger organisations, with bigger bureaucracies, were unable to respond as quickly and specifically (cited in Feeney, 2012: §2).

In only a short space of time, Occupy responded by providing tens of thousands of volunteers (four times the number of official aid workers), an estimated 15,000 meals and 120 truckloads of essential supplies (Kilkenny, 2013: §2), whilst raising \$1.5 million in donations (Maslin, 2013: §2). Donors were sympathetic to Occupy's hands-on approach, often preferring to give to the social movement rather than the Red Cross' "comparatively sluggish response" (ibid.: §18). By February 2013, Occupy Sandy's track record was even more impressive, as the journalist Sam Knight chronicles:

In February 2013, the group claimed to have filled 27,000 meal requests and reported assisting 3,400 residents with medical help, financial assistance, repairs and basic supplies with a mere \$1.34 million – roughly 1 percent of the entire Red Cross payroll and less than the sum of three Red Cross executives' salaries in 2012 (2014: §20).

Faced with the paucity of the official aid effort, Occupy Sandy quickly gained public as well as media favour. Time and again, journalists and commentators compared the effectiveness of Occupy's bottom-up horizontal organising to the inertia of the official aid organisations. Likening the federal failure to deliver fast

and effective relief to FEMA's negligence during Hurricane Katrina, Nick Pinto commented:

As temperatures dropped toward freezing two weeks after the storm, residents in public-housing apartments from Red Hook to the Lower East Side to Rockaway were still without power, water, and heat. Displaced homeowners surveyed the wreckage of their lives and wondered how they'd ever build back. And almost everywhere, the vaunted presence of FEMA and the Red Cross was next to invisible. Weeks after the storm, many New Yorkers in storm-damaged neighborhoods had yet to see any sort of institutional relief at all (2012: §4).

Occupy capitalized on this failure and made the independence from slow and ineffective government into one of their hallmarks. Mike Birch, one of Occupy's many cooks, championed this direct action approach when interviewed by a reporter from *Voice of America*: "Grassroots, real people power. We don't rely on the Red Cross, or FEMA, or the city" (2012: §18). Surveying the situation on the ground, the news report praised the unparalleled efficiency of Occupy's relief effort:

The scene at St. Jacobi Church, Brooklyn is controlled chaos: scores of people sorting and distributing tons of aid for relief centers in the hardest-hit parts of New York. Everyone is a volunteer, and all seem to be working at top speed (ibid.: §1).

Occupy Sandy proved what is proven time and again in disasters from New Orleans to the Philippines to Port-au-Prince. Namely, that self-organised citizen initiatives are better first responders to calamities than large governmental bodies. Among the first to note this fact was pioneering disaster scholar Charles Fritz, who in the 1960s, observed the communitarian behaviour that disasters generally inspire

and rejected the media reports of social anomie and collapse as the stuff that make up disaster movies.<sup>53</sup>

Even under the worst disaster conditions, people maintain or quickly regain self control and become concerned about the welfare of others. Most of the initial search, rescue, and relief activities are undertaken by disaster victims before the arrival of organized outside aid. Reports of looting in disasters are grossly exaggerated; rates of theft and burglary actually decline in disasters; and much more is given away than stolen. Other forms of antisocial behaviour, such as aggression toward others and scapegoating, are rare or nonexistent. Instead, most disasters produce a great increase in social solidarity among the stricken populace (1996: 10).

Occupy Sandy confirms the decades-long promotion of *local knowledge* in disaster studies. Critiquing the cold-war understanding of disasters as natural contingencies or technical failures, disaster studies began endorsing *local* methods of disaster risk reduction after its *vulnerability turn* in the 1980s. Rather than proposing a short-term fix, delivered by the momentary presence of aid workers or military personnel, the *vulnerability approach* promoted local knowledge as the answer to natural and man-made hazards. With this, it broke with the technocratic emphasis on expert knowledge that had dominated disaster research after WWII. How did vulnerability studies frame the idea of *local* as compared to *expert* knowledge?

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<sup>53</sup> The very first study to comment on the pro-social behaviour emerging after a disaster is Samuel Henry Prince's account of the explosion in Halifax Harbour in Nova Scotia, Canada. See Prince, S. H. (1920). Catastrophe and social change, based upon a sociological study of the Halifax disaster. New York,, Columbia University Press.

## 6.1 Vulnerability and the Emergence of Local Knowledge

In the 1980s, disaster scholars broke with the emphasis on expert authority and top-down knowledge that had dominated the disaster sector in the post-war era. With the awareness that disasters were not simply natural occurrences but rather socially produced, came a sensitivity for the local, cultural context that had given rise to a disaster, heightening its intensity, or mitigating its destructive effects. Here's how the disaster scholar Kathleen Tierney defines the turn towards vulnerability:

Put simply, the organizing idea [...] is that disasters and their impacts are socially produced, and that the forces driving the production of disaster are embedded in the social order itself (2014: 4).

Rather than proposing a short-term fix, delivered by the momentary presence of aid workers, the vulnerability approach began promoting *local knowledge* as the answer to disaster risk reduction. Organising aid in a top-down way, this former approach ignored established local ways of responding to hazards. Since it framed local disaster victims through a matrix of scientific expertise that denied them any access to relevant knowledge, as well as to the resources, needed to organise the relief effort, they were simply not listened to. In the words of vulnerability scholars Blaikie, Wisner, Cannon and Davis:

Too often, survivors are relegated to the role of passive spectators by aid workers who rapidly take over the entire recovery process [...] Some international consultants and the staff of certain agencies tend to sprout like mushrooms after disasters that attract media coverage [...] Such officials typically do their job and then all too quickly depart from the scene for yet another disaster or administrative talk or commission (1994: 207, 214).

Since the technocratic approach to disasters had derided local knowledge as ineffective in the fight against hazards, vulnerability scholars' strategy lay in radically changing the valence of local knowledge, which now emerged as the primary *solution* to building disaster resilience. Critical of the technocratic approach's top-down authoritarianism, vulnerability studies recognises that communities afflicted by disaster mostly already possess the resources needed for an effective response. Since disasters frequently reoccur in specific regions of the world, vulnerability studies trusts local people to have acquired the *capacity* and the *skills* to respond adequately.

Such *local capacities* include various elements in a community's way of life, for example technologies such as informal security systems, elaborate practices of land use and ecosystems management, adapted to the risk of floods, storms or drought. For vulnerability scholars, these practices constitute a learnt *habitus* that is perfectly adapted to a particular environment with its very own dangers and risks. The vulnerability approach reserves a minimal role to aid workers, whose task is reduced to bringing local knowledge to the fore and act as its *facilitator*. Rather than as technocratic expert, it views the aid worker as a cultural coordinator, who is trained in reading those *local capacities* that might at first sight be illegible to an outsider. For Greg Bankoff:

'The current emphasis on the importance of [...] local knowledge in disaster situations is a belated recognition that [people] have historically developed sophisticated strategies and complex institutions to reduce the constant insecurity of their lives [...] The respect now accorded to coping practices forms part of a wider attempt to broaden local participation in the entire development process through bottom-up planning and to empower local people through encouraging community participation. Local knowledge is seen as the key to success as it is the only resource controlled by the most

vulnerable, is already present at a potential disaster site, and in many cases constitutes a viable operational strategy (2004: 32).

The bulk of vulnerability studies advances such an empowered notion of local knowledge. For Kathleen Tierney too, communities mostly already possess the capacities needed to build resilience but all too often “powerful social forces will stand in the way of such improvement” (2014: 7). In this perspective, the task of the aid worker becomes to *listen to the locals* and help them exercise their knowledge in the forums and avenues that benefit them. In marked opposition to the technocratic approach to disaster, in vulnerability studies, there is a strong concern about speaking for people without a mandate. Ben Wisner emphasises the practice of creating open spaces to listen to local peoples’ concerns and engage in knowledge-sharing on an equal footing. Wisner maintains that the task of the vulnerability scholar is to give a voice to the marginalised and to reveal the hidden, but systematic violence that keeps local communities in situations of poverty. For Wisner, vulnerability is “the blockage, erosion or devaluation of local knowledge and coping practices, or – taken together - local capacity” (2004: 189). He argues there is a need to set free the people's “social capital (ibid.)” and to liberate the “creativity of the masses (ibid.)” to enable an effective and ethical process of recovery.

Piers Blaikie too advocates an idea of disaster relief as the creation of a free and open space to listen to the locals and to learn from local expertise. Whereas the aid worker formerly exercised his scientific authority to regain mastery over the situation, vulnerability studies restricts his role to that of facilitator and collaborator in the production of hybrid forms of expertise that blend local, vernacular skills with centralised resources. Similarly to Wisner, Piers Blaikie conceptualises vulnerability as a condition of blockage to the realisation of a community’s natural, unimpeded flourishing. For him, the vulnerability approach:

[...] Requires a genuine listening to local people and an awareness of how power relations can block the participation of the most vulnerable. Indeed, as Chambers [1983] puts it, one must ‘put the last first’. Doing so opens up a channel of communication between the people and disaster aid workers that goes beyond ‘consultation’. People are able to express their needs and work together with outsiders to overcome obstacles (1994: 214).

What is the epistemological background of this connection between a distinct location and a form of knowledge? Indeed, what is the deeper justification of this valorisation of the local that emerges as privileged with regard to *knowledge production*? With its deconstruction of the authoritarian position of the knowing ‘expert’ and the reversal of the power hierarchy that now “puts the last first”, the epistemology advanced by the vulnerability approach emerged from within the feminist and deconstructivist critiques of scientific objectivity, put forward in the 1970s. Let us take a deeper, historical look at *local knowledge* before evaluating its efficacy in the case of Occupy Sandy.

## 6.2 Local Knowledge as Situated Knowledge

Arguing that established scientific paradigms presupposed the universality of a subject that was in reality white, privileged and male, deconstruction and feminism set out to challenge its hegemony by elaborating a ‘successor science’ that, rather than claiming universal knowledge, would be made up of several composite knowledges that did not deny their boundedness but were instead *place-specific, local or situated*. Along with Clifford Geertz’ anthropological treatise *Local Knowledge* (1983),<sup>54</sup> Donna Haraway’s essay *Situated Knowledges* (1988) can be seen to form the epistemic backbone of vulnerability studies’ emphasis on local knowledge.

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<sup>54</sup> In this collection, the essay *From the Native’s Point of View* in particular outlines Geertz’ methodology for understanding the particular knowledge of a subaltern group.



“Location is about vulnerability”, wrote Donna Haraway in *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. In her work, Haraway develops a radically partial form of *local knowledge* she calls *situated knowledge*. Her starting point is the radical multiplicity of a wide array of knowledges that are all incommensurable with each other. Having been formulated from particular standpoints, they don't share the same outlook, perspectives and concerns. For Haraway, every epistemology is situated and necessarily bounded by that situation. However, this doesn't mean giving up on the promise of objective knowledge, it just means that no viewpoint is sufficient in itself to provide the kind of panoramic overview traditionally associated with ‘objectivity’. For Haraway, situated objectivity can only be achieved through a democratic conversation between the partial positions; by creating a ‘network of connections’ between standpoints, translating between ‘power-differentiated-communities’ and constructing a mediated subject position that is based on radical insufficiency and multiplicity. While Haraway does not argue that this objectivity is achieved in a power-free or neutral space, she has a lot of hope for situated knowledge as a “wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organising worlds” (1988: 583), in which “only partial perspective promises objectivity” (ibid.).

Like the vulnerability approach, Haraway advances a strong concept of ‘partiality’ to arrive at a more accurate and just epistemology. And like in Piers Blaikie’s account of those vulnerable communities that came ‘last’ and now deserve to be put ‘first’, Haraway also believes in the epistemic advantage of the underprivileged that now emerges as favoured among the array of partial knowledges. She frames her account of situated knowledge as emerging explicitly from the vulnerable position of marginality she calls the ‘subjugated’:

Many currents in feminism attempt to theorise grounds for trusting especially the vantage points of the subjugated; there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the

powerful. Building on that suspicion, this essay is an argument for situated and embodied knowledges [...] Subjugated standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world (1988: 583-584 ).

Nevertheless, Haraway cautions against appropriations of the position of the subjugated and claims to speak on their behalf. “There is a serious danger”, she writes, “of romanticising and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions” (ibid.: 584).

At the outset of her essay, Haraway contrasts the position of the subjugated with the position of dominant mastery. For her, the essential difference is that “we are the embodied others, who are not allowed not to have a body” (ibid.: 575). Echoing a classical tenet in feminist theory, the masculine, rational subject can imagine himself as disembodied, universal and capable of abstract thought, while the female is imagined as an essentially corporeal creature, tied to bodily rhythms and incapable of rational inquiry. For Haraway, the essence of masculine science lies in a stifling reduction of the object of science to an inert body that can be appropriated at will by the male knowledge-seeker. By being thus reduced to a mere ‘object-for-knowledge’, the scientific object is denied any kind of agency or any potential for ‘conversation’ with the subject.

Haraway highlights how situated knowledge differs from the objectifying paradigm by creating a dialogical space that allows the scientific object to speak back. For Haraway, the methodologies in the social sciences, championed by the vulnerability approach (such as ethnography and participant observation) are exemplary “critical approaches [...] where the agency of people studied itself transforms the entire project of producing social theory” (1988: 592). Haraway characterises this dialogue that does not disavow power differentials but instead attempts to productively overcome them as a *new dialectic*. While the Hegelian

dialectic had established the conditions for a productive encounter between subject and object in a scientific setting, for Haraway, it too quickly aborted this dialogue by subsuming the encounter into a synthesis or a new fixed form. According to Haraway, what is needed is an *open-ended* dialectic between situated knowledges that together produce situated objectivity in a “power-sensitive conversation” (ibid.: 590). Haraway argues that this dialogue would truly dissolve the boundary between scientific subject and scientific object:

Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of ‘objective knowledge (ibid.: 592).’

Her references to the *dialectic* make Haraway’s elaboration of situated knowledge a peculiar one that hovers uncomfortably between materialist and postmodern epistemologies. Certainly, the idea of an epistemic privilege, pertaining to those who are marginalised by configurations of power is common critical currency since Marx posited the proletariat as the epistemically privileged historical actor.<sup>55</sup> However, while Marxism, and later Marxist Feminism, grounded this epistemic privilege in the centrality of the ‘subjugated’ to the capitalist modes of production and reproduction, Haraway falls short of grounding *situated knowledge* in anything outside the positioning of a subject *as* a marginal body. While she nuances her claim for *situated knowledge* by asserting that “to see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if ‘we’ ‘naturally’ inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges” (1988: 584) she nevertheless seems to justify the

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<sup>55</sup> The comparison with Marxism is incisive here. While in Marx, the proletariat is similarly radically partial in its social positioning, its epistemic privilege stems from it being at the same time the only ‘universal class’. Rather than from simply being positioned as partial, the proletariat instead ascends to knowledge through its partisanship, by negating existing capitalist relations. For a brilliant account of this alternative Marxist version of partiality, see Toscano, A. (2009). “Partisan thought.” *Historical Materialism* 17(3): 175-191.

existence of epistemic privilege simply *qua natural* inhabiting rather than dynamically or dialectically as the negative element of a social totality.

Even so, vulnerability studies appears as a great leap forward, compared to the cold war command-and-control style of the Red Cross or FEMA. Since the 1970s, disaster scholars have flaunted the creation of a dialogical and open space, in which aid workers and local people can exchange knowledge on how to best mitigate calamities. However, this progressive image is keenly lacking an economic dimension, since which great economic changes also happened in the 1970s that have so unambiguously been pinned to the names of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan? This alerts us to the question of economic periodisation and an evaluation of vulnerability studies in the *current* era. Let us return to Occupy Sandy to attempt to answer these questions.

### 6.3 The Strange Victory of Occupy Sandy

Occupy Sandy's overwhelming success practically confirms disaster studies affirmation of local knowledge. But to what avail? In the autumn of 2013, one year after Superstorm Sandy, the Department of Homeland Security published a comprehensive report, endorsing the social movement's relief effort. In a study entitled *The Resilient Social Network*, Homeland Security – a huge governmental body that emerged in response to the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and incorporates the Federal Emergency Management Agency FEMA as well as the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) that prosecutes and deports undocumented migrants<sup>56</sup> – praised the bottom-up spontaneity of Occupy's relief

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<sup>56</sup> The Homeland Security Act of 2002, passed in the direct aftermath of 9/11 united a panoply of new and old agencies in one organisation. It constituted the largest governmental reorganisation since the founding of the Department of Defense in 1947. For a view of Homeland Security and its involvement in Hurricane Sandy, see Hintze, T. (2014). "Homeland Security Study Praises Occupy Sandy, With Murky Intentions." Retrieved 02.04.2016, from <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/22837-dhs-study-praises-occupy-sandy-with-murky-intentions>.

effort. Mirroring current disaster research (Dynes, 1994, Neal and Phillips, 1995), Homeland Security praised the efficacy of self-organised disaster relief, admitting the “limitations of traditional relief efforts” to provide adequate aid services in an age of heightened disaster risk.<sup>57</sup> In its ‘Executive Summary’ of the events, Homeland Security is unambiguous in its praise for the social movements’ relief effort:

Within hours of Sandy's landfall, members from the Occupy Wall Street movement – a planned social movement comprised of social activists who protested income inequality in the United States – used social media to tap the wider Occupy network for volunteers and aid. Overnight, a volunteer army of young, educated, tech-savvy individuals with time and a desire to help others emerged. In the days, weeks, and months that followed, “Occupy Sandy” became one of the leading humanitarian groups providing relief to survivors across New York City and New Jersey. At its peak, it had grown to an estimated 60,000 volunteers – more than four times the number deployed by the American Red Cross (Ambinder, Jennings et al., 2013: 1).

The Homeland Security report goes on to praise the relief effort in much the same vocabulary and tone that we have seen vulnerability scholars adopt vis-à-vis *local capacities*. Enumerating five ‘Occupy Sandy Success Drivers’ that include “the horizontal structure of Occupy Sandy” (ibid.: 3), “social media as the primary means to attract and mobilize a large volunteer corps” (ibid.), as well as, ironically, the “Occupy Wall Street infrastructure” (ibid.), the report admiringly concludes that:

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<sup>57</sup> The report is accessible online, via the Homeland Security website. See <http://homelandsecurity.org/docs/the%20resilient%20social%20network.pdf> (Accessed 01.02.16)

Unlike traditional disaster response organizations, there were no appointed leaders, no bureaucracy, no regulations to follow, no pre-defined mission, charter, or strategic plan. There was just relief (ibid.: 1).

Aiming to learn from Occupy Sandy's bottom-up approach, the stated purpose of the Homeland Security report is to “determine how FEMA can coordinate response activities and capabilities with grassroots entities operating at the local level” (ibid.: 3).

How can we make sense of the strange proximity between the US government and Occupy Sandy? Wasn't Occupy Wall Street a resolutely anti-state social movement that had protested the governmental bailout of banks as fundamentally unjust? Had the NYPD not attacked Occupiers with pepper spray and violently removed protesters from Zuccotti Park in the autumn of 2011? Just one year and one hurricane later, everything was different. Mayor Bloomberg went out to Brooklyn to pay tribute to the activists (Yakas, 2012). A few weeks later, Occupy was meeting with the NYPD and the National Guard to soak up their praise and coordinate contingency plans (Robbins, 2012). After another few months, the social movement that had blockaded banks on Wall Street was filling out applications for government grants and soliciting donations for reconstruction from *Home Depot* (Maslin, 2013).<sup>58</sup> What had happened?

A possible answer emerged when the Obama administration presented its budget for the fiscal year 2013. Quoting the ‘superiority’ of community-run disaster aid, the proposal suggested a \$1 billion cut to FEMA’s annual budget, amounting

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<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Occupy’s collaboration with governmental bodies such as the NYPD as well as corporations like Home Depot was contentiously discussed among participants of the social movement and by no means an uncontroversial issue. However, it was ruled that by collaborating with antagonistic institutions the movement would be able to extend its control and influence into areas that would have otherwise remained inaccessible.

to a 14% budget reduction compared to the fiscal year 2012.<sup>59</sup> As evidence indicated that self-help initiatives were more successful than government aid, disaster relief could be proposed as a prime area for reductions in government spending. This continued a trend begun by the Bush government, which had restructured FEMA by subsuming it under the Department of Homeland Security, leading to heavy budget cuts. As the eco-critical writer Rosemary Radford Ruether points out: FEMA was already “greatly eroded under the Bush administration by funding cuts [...] where most of the funding went to anti-terror plans” (2006: 179).

The policy of offsetting government deficits through cuts to social spending is known as *austerity*. Its application in the US can be traced back to the 1970s, when the post-war Keynesian productivity deal, in which high wages guaranteed a high level of welfare, and consequently of spending power, entered into crisis. In competition with the economies of Japan and West Germany, the US productive power reached a limit, as markets quickly became saturated (Brenner, 2006). To overcome the economic downturn, the US government attempted to relaunch production through deindustrialisation, while at the same time reducing the federal state deficit that had steadily grown since WWII. On the side of production, heavy industry was moved offshore, in particular to Asia, where wages were lower. At the same time as the economy was being deindustrialised, the finance, insurance and real estate sectors received massive investments and favourable conditions in the form of deregulated markets and tax breaks in order to rekindle the economy through the financialisation of assets, i.e. by hedging its future on the speculative gains of the stock market (Harvey, 2005, McNally, 2009).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>This extreme reduction was only topped by the budget proposal of the Republican Party under Mitt Romney that suggested a 40% cut to the FEMA budget. See Khimm, S. (2012). "Obama cuts FEMA funding by 3 percent. Romney-Ryan cuts it by 40 percent. Or more. Or less." Retrieved 10.03.2016, 2016, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/work/wp/2012/10/30/obama-cuts-fema-funding-by-3-percent-romney-ryan-cuts-it-by-40-percent-or-more-or-less/..](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/work/wp/2012/10/30/obama-cuts-fema-funding-by-3-percent-romney-ryan-cuts-it-by-40-percent-or-more-or-less/) See the full budget proposal for FEMA for 2013 [http://www.fema.gov/pdf/about/budget/11f\\_fema\\_disaster\\_relief\\_fund\\_dhs\\_fy13\\_cj.pdf](http://www.fema.gov/pdf/about/budget/11f_fema_disaster_relief_fund_dhs_fy13_cj.pdf) (Accessed 23.02.16)

<sup>60</sup> In 1971, President Richard Nixon uncoupled the dollar from the gold standard, making the future of the world economy dependent on the future-oriented fluctuations of the stock market. In this context, the

While production received this de-industrial makeover, the primary way for the government to reduce federal overheads was by rolling back social spending on a massive scale. The political theorist Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen describes the era since the 1970s as “one long crash landing [in which] capitalism has tried to reconstruct itself by saving on social reproduction through debt, technological development and the outsourcing of production” (2015: 147). The dominant form this cutback takes is a drastic reduction in real wages as well as in the social reproductive services of health care, education and emergency aid. For the average American, this had dire consequences. Rasmussen confirms that:

In the US the standard of living has dropped between 20 and 30% since the beginning of the 1970s and it is no longer possible to support a family with one paycheck (in the 1960s a working week of forty hours was enough to support a family, today eighty hours is often not enough), wage differences have exploded (since the 1970s the difference between the richest fifth of the US population and the poorest increased exponentially and is today bigger than in 1929) (ibid.: 29).

In line with Rasmussen’s assessment, economic analyses of the decades since the 1970s diagnose a ‘long downturn’ (Brenner, 2006) or ‘world-slump’ (McNally, 2009), resulting from a real crisis of capital accumulation, which governments have sought to counter by minimising all forms of social spending. This has created a situation of *generalised non-reproduction* (Goldner, 2007), in which more and more people are tendentially excluded from formal employment. With the state thus reduced to the core functions of security and surveillance, disaster victims are left

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political scientist David McNally differentiates between value and capital, arguing that Nixon’s decoupling proclaimed the end of value and hailed the beginning of ‘fictitious capital’. See McNally, D. (2009). "From Financial Crisis to World-Slump: Accumulation, Financialisation, and the Global Slowdown." Historical Materialism 17(2): 35-83.



to their own devices, a situation which disaster studies embellishes through references to grassroots organisation, local capacity and communitarian action.

Referring to Naomi Klein's work on *Disaster Capitalism* (2007), the collective *Out of the Woods* has recently described the effects of *austerity politics* on the disaster sector. In the wake of a massive cutback of governmental spending, communities are first exposed to disaster by development aggression, urban immiseration and the privatisation of infrastructure. Once the hurricane hits, disaster victims are made responsible to pay for the reconstruction process out of their own bloodied pockets:

Since self-organised disaster communities are more effective than state agencies and market forces at responding to disasters, the state can simply sit back and let people suffer, then reassert itself when the community dissipates as normality returns. This is the state's interest in 'resilience', exposing proletarians to disaster, abandoning them to survive by their own efforts, and then moving in with the 'disaster capitalism' of reconstruction and gentrification once the moment of disaster has passed (2014: Pt 1. Disaster Communities).

We are now able to draw preliminary conclusions about the economic role that local knowledge plays in an era of austerity. While theories that championed grassroots organisation may have had a critical thrust in the 1970s, they have been outpaced by the real historical development of capitalism that culminates in the austerity state. Countering the technocratic disaster relief that followed WWII, scientific research as well as popular activism promoted the people's ability to survive alone and without the state. Unbeknownst to its actors and participants however, this discourse emerged in parallel to the large-scale dismantling of the welfare system, in which the state withdrew from the task of maintaining its population alive and in good health. Rather than providing essential services like

health care, pensions and disaster relief, these domains have been increasingly privatised, which has opened new and lucrative business avenues for capital (Harvey, 2005, Adams, 2012, Adams, 2013). In a context where communities effectively have no other choice than to self-organise in order to remain alive, the possibility of the subjugated to ‘speak back’ and engage in a shared space of knowledge production is harnessed by institutions like Homeland Security and fed back into their systems of regulation and control.

Citizen initiatives have thus unwittingly and paradoxically legitimized neoliberal reforms towards the privatization of aid. However, when citizens are made to “shoulder the burden of the failed state” (Kilkenny, 2013: §3), many questions are left unanswered; citizen efforts are simply not adept to organize large-scale rebuilding, infrastructure repairs, or resettlement grants. By claiming a deliberately ‘insufficient’, ‘partial’, and ‘multiple’ perspective, in which knowledge is produced in conversation and in dialogue, vulnerability studies neglects the role of local knowledge in the reproduction of the very vulnerable conditions it set out to fight. The time is thus ripe for a paradigm shift.

I want to suggest that what is needed for disaster studies to again become critical and fulfil its mandate of providing research on how to mitigate disasters is a different relation to vulnerability. We have seen that the prevailing relation that scholars and activists adopt towards the vulnerable is a valorisation and an endorsement of their local knowledge, whose particular capacities are championed in the fight against disaster. However, a close look at the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy has shown that this valorisation has today become problematic. Intended to build autonomy and self-determination vis-à-vis the state, the affirmation of local knowledge becomes counterproductive, once the self-sufficiency of communities becomes a mandated state policy. Set up in opposition to the state, Occupy Sandy

quickly became a necessary communitarian engagement under conditions of scarcity. With this, however, it also lost its unique value as a critical practice.<sup>61</sup>

In a different critical register, and as McKenzie Wark (2015) has recently remarked, the position of the vulnerable has for decades been called ‘the labour point of view’. Extending this materialist viewpoint outward from Occupy Sandy, we find an alternative relation to vulnerability that instead of identifying with the vulnerable position, critically reflects on its function between the state and the market. Let us explore this possibility before concluding.

## 6.4 Disasters from the Labour Point of View

What can the labour point of view tell us today? Does it not hark back to a bygone era? To state socialism and the dream of a society modelled on the collective worker? On the contrary, for the cultural theorist Michael Denning the need for a labour viewpoint emerges precisely *in response to the crisis* that beset the Left, following the West’s large-scale deindustrialisation that transformed formerly industrial societies into consumer cultures. This shift meant that long-rehearsed Marxist patterns of explanation, based on the gradual victory of the proletariat, became increasingly untenable as the post-war *New Left* struggled to develop new

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<sup>61</sup> Can we not say that this is also the sad predicament of much of the identity politics that informed vulnerability studies’ political orientation? Nancy Fraser has argued that it was precisely the feminist movement’s turn towards a politics of recognition that diluted its radical goal of smashing gendered subjugation within capitalist reproduction into a weak claim for the acceptance of gendered difference, enabling feminism’s alliance with neoliberalism at the end of the 20th century. See Fraser, N. (2013). Fortunes of feminism: from state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis. London; New York, Verso Books. Similarly, Jasbir Puar has shown how the promotion of same-sex marriage by the US government has rendered invisible prevailing hetero-normative structures in the US, while contributing to an Islamophobic demonization of Middle Eastern countries that are openly homophobic. See Puar, J. K. (2007). Terrorist assemblages: homonationalism in queer times. Durham, Duke University Press. Finally, Jared Sexton has critiqued the official multiracialism of American society for generating an inclusion of successful people of colour at the expense of a persistent and anti-black exclusion of the African-American community. See Sexton, J. (2008). Amalgamation schemes: antiblackness and the critique of multiracialism. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press. These critical accounts share an underlying narrative of the co-option of radical energies by capitalist and state forces. They thereby pose the question of a revitalised politics of negative critique.

critical accounts of post-industrial society and its declining proletarian identity. In Denning's words, the question was:

How to invent a Marxism without class. How could one maintain the insights and political drive of historical materialism in an epoch where left, right and center generally agreed that the classes of Fordist capitalism were passing from the stage of world history, when the 'labour metaphysic' [...] seemed irrelevant (2004: 84).<sup>62</sup>

For Denning, the *New Left* responded to the changes in the world economy by developing two dominant theoretical models. The first centred on the market and commodity culture as the structuring determinants of capitalist life. The second focused on the state and its fine-tuned modes of government that created docile and obedient citizens. Denning equates the first, market-based explanation with the analyses of Guy Debord and the second, state-based explanation with the figure of Michel Foucault. However, Denning notes that in both accounts *production* is conspicuously absent and it is here that the demand for a labour viewpoint arises. Reviewing the humanities landscape since the 1960s, Denning describes "our reluctance to represent work (2004: 91)" and the fact that in most social-scientific accounts "work remains invisible" (ibid.: 92). How can we apply the labour viewpoint to disasters and what can this application teach us today?

Following Denning, I argue that the labour viewpoint requires that we see different forms of social action *as* labour, meaning as *productive* activity under capitalism. Through the wage, capitalism socially validates some activities – such as work in factories and offices – as labour, while framing others as driven by altruism or care and thereby as unworthy of pay. The reproduction of capitalism thus necessitates the interplay between two distinct spheres. Firstly, a commercial sector

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<sup>62</sup> The 'labour metaphysic' is C. Wright Mills' term from Mills' 1960 Letter to the New Left. See Wright Mills, C. (1960). "Letter to the New Left." *New Left Review* 5(5). Available at <https://www.marxists.org/subject/humanism/mills-c-wright/letter-new-left.htm>

where activities are performed for a direct market profit (DMM), and secondly a non-commercial sector where activities are performed at a remove from immediate market interest (IMM).<sup>63</sup>

While corporations occupy the DMM sphere, the state has historically occupied the IMM sphere, in which civil servants provided health care, education, public infrastructure and disaster relief as social services, free of charge.<sup>64</sup> Formerly firmly in the sphere of waged IMM activities, since the crisis of the 1970s, states have been increasingly “withdrawing from organizing IMM activities because they are a mere cost” (Endnotes, 2013: 86). The economist Loren Goldner (2007) calls this a process of capitalist ‘self-cannibalisation’, in which states divest the means of basic social reproduction to cut costs, resulting in falling wages, an increase in private debt, the privatisation of health care and education and a public infrastructure left to rot. In the U.S. emergency budgets have been significantly cut, despite an increasing disaster-rate. Some of these services were privatised and transformed into commercial DMM activities in the form of insurances and private security services, constituting a classical operation of disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007). What is ignored by theorists of disaster capitalism, however, is that more often than not service providers do not seem to find these operations profitable, since they are confronted with impoverished communities who cannot pay for the added security in their lives. In the majority of cases, relief work consequently stays in the IMM sphere but becomes the unwaged responsibility of neighbours, victims and volunteers.

Faced with this crisis, activists of social movements such as Occupy – many of whose members were indeed unemployed (Hintze, 2014) – have begun

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<sup>63</sup> As elaborated in chapter I, I take this distinction from Endnotes. See Endnotes (2013). "The Logic of Gender." *Endnotes* 3(3): 63-93. p. 63.

<sup>64</sup> The extent of this provision varies strongly from country to country but one finds a variation of state-funded IMM activities in almost all modern states.

organising essential community services by themselves.<sup>65</sup> However, despite Occupy's effort to provide 'solidarity' rather than 'charity', these activities are haunted by their complicity with the neoliberal transfer of social responsibility onto voluntary aid providers. In the worst case, social movements are in this way helping to create the austerity state. In conclusion, the labour viewpoint suggests the inability to affirm self-organisation because it plays into the neoliberal idea of the *Big Society*, in which members of the community perform formerly state-run services as unpaid labour.<sup>66</sup> This highlights a new political situation, in which disaster studies' classical opposition between the state and civil society appears as definitively superseded. How can we characterise this new configuration between society, the market and the state? I argue that re-examining the notion of *vulnerability* that forms the cornerstone of self-organised relief practices can provide us with an answer to this question.

Writing on the political conjuncture since the 1970s, the anthropologist Didier Fassin highlights the particular role of *vulnerability* in the contemporary political landscape. Fassin asserts that vulnerability has today become a key concept that is embodied in the practice of humanitarianism: For Fassin, "[humanitarianism] relates to [...] the treatment of the poor, immigrants, abused women, children affected by poverty – in short, all those categories constituted in terms of 'vulnerability'" (2010: 269). For Fassin, the perspective of vulnerability entails a general shift in political practice and activist rhetoric to a grammar of suffering, in

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<sup>65</sup> This situation has given rise to a rich academic and activist debate on the possibility of organising 'the commons', spaces for the collective sharing of resources and the self-organisation of collective social reproduction. While many Marxist Feminists have actively tried to self-organise social reproduction, the notion of the commons as autonomously emancipatory has been recently heavily critiqued. For a pro-commons perspective, see Federici, S. (2012). Revolution at point zero : housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle. Oakland, CA; Brooklyn, NY; London, PM Press; Autonomedia. For a critique of commons discourse, see Williams, E. C. (2011). *Fire to the Commons. Communization and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique and Contemporary Struggles*. B. Noys. Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson, Minor Compositions: 175-195.

<sup>66</sup> Indeed, David Cameron's idea of the Big Society, one of the hallmarks of the Conservative government in the UK shares a lot with the politics of self-help endorsed by the Department for Homeland Security. Cameron advocates the organisation of social services "on a voluntary basis". The Big Society is a political culture "where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace [...] feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities." See Cameron, D. (2010). Speech 'The Big Society', Liverpool, 19 July 2010.

which *human life* emerges as the ultimate civic good, in need of protection. Enhancing Denning's diagnostic of a market-based and a state-based analysis of the present, we can argue with Fassin that *humanitarianism* represents the third pillar on which contemporary government rests:

We could even say that philanthropic politics is a sort of moral counterpart to the contemporaneous development of both the police state, understood as the ensemble of apparatuses maintaining security and control of populations, and classical liberal reason, understood as the emergence of economic activity into the field of power [...] Under this hypothesis, modern governance would rest not on two but on three pillars: to the police and liberalism, we should thus add humanitarianism (2010: 272).

Fassin emphasises that in contrast to state sovereignty, the quintessential humanitarian actors are members of civil society and non-governmental organizations, which have experienced an unparalleled proliferation since the 1960s (Rosenau, 1990). Fassin further specifies that as a consequence of its non-parliamentarianism, humanitarianism draws its vital force precisely from its apparent opposition to the state. While humanitarian organisations see themselves as firmly “on the side of life” (2010: 276), Fassin argues “they have to place political actors on the side of death” (ibid.), resulting in an ostensible opposition to the state.<sup>67</sup> *Counter* to this self-proclaimed opposition, Fassin outlines the contemporary embedding of humanitarian practices at the very heart of a new governmental rationale that spans the state, the market and civil society and that Fassin calls *Humanitarian Reason* (2012).

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67 Fassin's account of the emergence of humanitarianism as a resolutely anti-state position is complemented by Michael Behrent's brilliant study of the French Second Left. The Second Left was an important side current in the French political landscape that alongside the emerging neoliberal policy-makers critiqued the established Left's fixation on the state. Against the state's policy of dirigisme or intervention, the Second Left promoted autogestion or self-management to “decompose and redistribute the functions of the capitalist state, transforming its shackles into a voluntary institution.” See Behrent, M. C. (2015). *Liberalism without Humanism: Michel Foucault and the Free Market Creed, 1976-1979. Foucault and neoliberalism*. D. Zamora and M. C. Behrent. Malden, MA, Polity Press: 69-155. p. 96.

In line with Fassin's analysis, I claim that the case of Occupy Sandy serves as a counter-history to the way in which self-organized reproductive activism presents itself today. Rather than in opposition to the state, self-organised social reproduction integrates itself functionally into a new interplay between the state, the market and the people. By proving that the people can survive alone and by themselves, it alleviates the charges against state-administered austerity through the maintenance of social reproduction under conditions of imposed scarcity.

How does our disaster landscape look like today? For the Department of Homeland Security, it looks like this: "If there will be more disasters in the future, and there will be, then there will be more opportunities, opportunities like Occupy Sandy" (Ambinder, Jennings et al., 2013: 21). From the labour point of view, we can say that *becoming opportunities* is what has to be resisted. Instead, social movements providing disaster aid will have to enter into real conflict with existing capitalist relations. They will have to consider their role within the wider frame of social reproduction and adapt their strategies accordingly, since any activist movement that merely performs *relief labour* for free does not have the chance to break with communities' imposed vulnerability. It might achieve improvements and incremental ameliorations but it will not put an end to the power structures that expose populations differently to disaster across the globe.



## VII Coda: The Separated Society

*In this society unity appears as accidental, separation as normal.*

—Karl Marx

### 7 Stepping in when the State Retreats

In her ethnographic study of long term disaster recovery in New Orleans, Vincanne Adams (2013) tells the story of Gerald. Displaced by Hurricane Katrina, Gerald returned home after three months in exile to find his house destroyed and uninhabitable. Living off social security but with no mail address, Gerald was unsure where his benefit cheques were sent. Wanting to access his meagre savings, he went to his bank but discovered that his branch had been flooded and was closed. Not qualifying for any of the FEMA emergency shelters because he was accompanied by his pet dog, Gerald slept in his car, trying to figure out what to do next. One day, with his cash savings dwindling and on the verge of destitution, he was picked up by a group of Canadian volunteers from the Good News Camp, a Christian faith-based aid organisation that had set up shop in New Orleans days after the hurricane hit the city. By the time they met Gerald, the volunteers disposed of a temporary shelter, medical facilities, as well as a soup kitchen. At its peak, the organisation hosted over 17,000 volunteers from across North America.

Good News Camp was no isolated case. New Orleans saw a huge outpouring of public and private sympathy in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. It is estimated that by 2009, as many as five hundred new charities were formed to cater to the displaced and the destitute. In total, as many as 1.5 million volunteers came to the region to assist the reconstruction process (Adams, 2013: 133). Not all of the new charities were faith-based. Among the most well-known is the Common Ground Relief Collective, founded by the former Black Panther member Malik

Rahim. Under the slogan “Solidarity not Charity”, Common Ground ran community programmes such as a health clinic, legal counselling services, as well as home-construction assistance. Furthermore, the organisation gutted houses and did repair work. Regardless if their motivations were secular or religious, the volunteer groups in New Orleans shared one and the same mission; to step in where the federal government fell short. Vincanne Adams sums up the paradox of this altruistic gesture at a time when the federal government systematically withdraws from providing adequate disaster relief:

The large response of charities, nongovernmental grass-roots, and faith-based organizations was overwhelming in the case of post-Katrina New Orleans. It was also both a critique of the failure of federal subcontracting companies—the inefficient work of FEMA, Road Home, the Small Business Administration (SBA), and insurance companies—and an endorsement of the neoliberal policies that set these failed programs in motion. The fact is, the federal government had for some years been calling on the charity sector to do just this, to fill in where their own programs had failed (2013: 127-128).<sup>68</sup>

Organisations such as Good News Camp and Common Ground Collective challenge us to rethink the role of disaster relief, provided by civil society in changing economic conditions. What is the value of self-organised social reproduction when its provision runs the risk of justifying the state’s austerity measures? The history of disaster aid during the Short American Century leaves us with many such paradoxes that demand a more thoroughgoing theorisation of the changing economic relation between the state and civil society. The foregoing case studies marked out the entwined trajectory of these two spheres and sketched their

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<sup>68</sup> It is debatable to what extent Adams’ framing of the federal government’s austerity measures as a ‘failure’ is adequate to the situation. Indeed, my case studies have demonstrated that rather than a failure, the federal withdrawal from reproductive activities constitutes a structural tendency, rather than a failed attempt.

modifications with regard to the reproductive labour of disaster relief. I zoomed in on two moments of economic crisis, in which the changing patterns of these elementary spheres become transparent. First, the Great Depression of the 1930s, in which disaster aid became a federal responsibility under a strong, quasi social-democratic state. Then, the deindustrialisation of the 1970s, in which the federal state gradually withdrew from the provision of aid services, shifting the responsibility for relief back onto civil society. On one side, we have the *New Deal* and *Keynesianism*, on the other, we have *austerity*. We can view both responses as adequate to their respective conditions of emergence, while subsuming them under a vaster historical narrative of crisis. Let us recapitulate the characteristics of these two historical moments before re-evaluating the relation between state and civil society during disasters today.

With the New Deal, the ensuing war economy and particularly the post WWII reconstruction, the Great Depression could be momentarily overcome through ample federal investments into the welfare of workers, which in turn spurred buying power and invigorated the economy. Disaster-prone states such as Florida and California received generous cash injections to rebuild their infrastructure, employing thousands, and extending real estate development to hard-to-reach areas. As early as 1960, however, the productive power of the US began to wane again. This time, the response was austerity, rather than abundance. Replacing Keynesianism with Chicago School neoliberalism, the government began cutting social spending to limit the growing federal debt. For the disaster context, this meant that relief moved from being the purview of the government to being the individual or communitarian responsibility that it had been until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Within this shift from the state-funded disaster aid of the New Deal to the withdrawal of the state from diverse forms of reproductive labour, the Black Panther Party's initiatives of self-organised welfare programmes form a telling

hinge. Reacting to a situation of endemic structural violence against African Americans, the Panthers' attempts to strengthen the community by providing medical, nutritional and educational services were deliberately aimed against the state's unwillingness to extend these services to black communities. When read against the historical trend of deindustrialisation and the concomitant repudiation of state-administered social reproduction, the Black Panthers' social programmes appear in a new and provocative light.

The Panthers recognised the untruthfulness of the state's and capital's promises of full employment and upward mobility, trying instead to help themselves in a situation of structural aggression. However, rather than being merely adaptive and ameliorative, the party always maintained that its actions had a revolutionary horizon because they attempted to construct a parallel welfare network, actually able to rival the state's monopoly on reproductive service provision. In this way, the Panthers were fundamentally positioned against the integrationist demands of the Civil Rights Movement that accepted a greater degree of legal inclusion and political representation but ignored the incremental social exclusion of African Americans *as* surplus populations.<sup>69</sup> In the course of the 1970s, the Panthers' model became the template for a wide range of similar attempts that focused on self-organisation in conditions of structural violence. Most notably, the Young Lords' initiatives to bring medical services to the neglected Puerto Rican communities of New York's Spanish Harlem (Enck-Wanzer, 2010).

However, while the Black Panthers were successful in providing social services for communities in need, their actions at the same time presaged the new responsibility that befalls civil society in the age of austerity. When the state

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<sup>69</sup> In the 1970s, buoyant from the legal gains of the Civil Rights Movement, only very few anticipated the tendential exclusion of African Americans from the very industrial labour jobs they had campaigned to be included in. For a prophetic sociological work from 1970 that was largely dismissed at the time, see Wilhelm, S. M. (1993). Who Needs the Negro? Hampton, VA, U.B. & U.S. Communications Systems.

gradually withdrew from the provision of reproductive social services, starting in the 1970s, communities had no other choice but to shoulder the reproductive burden themselves. However, to relieve the federal state from the provision of social services by managing them collectively runs the risk of legitimising the state's regime of austerity by proving that the people can survive alone and without assistance in dire times. For Vincanne Adams, this paradox constitutes the fundamental aporia of self-organisation today:

The recent rise in the number of nonprofit, non-governmental organizations, service groups, and humanitarian and charity-based aid organizations in the United States now, however, must be seen at least in part as a direct outcome of policy commitments to the basic philosophical assumption that the government *should not* be responsible for taking care of its needy citizens when the private sector can and should do this job better (2013: 128).

## 7.1 The Integration of Self-Organisation

While on the rise in the 1970s, the Black Panthers' form of *resistant* self-organisation almost completely disappeared in the 1980s and 1990s (Arena, 2012). Instead, grassroots community organising became absorbed into the neoliberal policy shift from centralised service provision to community-run services. This shift saw a strong valorisation of aspirational community work as a means to escape poverty. It is visible in the Clinton era policy reforms that provide the backdrop to the Chicago heat wave. Attempting to tackle the phenomenon of inner city poverty, policymakers claimed that the roots of material destitution were to be found within poor communities themselves. According to the so-called neighbourhood effects theory, once an area experiences a high degree of poverty, there is a high likelihood this poverty will be reproduced inside the community (Goetz, 2013: 344). The justification for this trend follows a behaviourist logic. Due

to a lack of aspirational role modelling, social control and a shortage of professional social networks, poor people are believed to have trouble accessing the social mobility of the job market (Joseph, Chaskin et al., 2007: 373). According to the well-known African American sociologist William Julius Wilson, who became President Bill Clinton's right hand in tackling inner city poverty, the result is a culture of welfare dependency that maintains poor black communities in inherited destitution that is passed on from generation to generation (ibid.: 374).

Policymakers in the 1980s and 1990s saw the solution to the problem of welfare dependency in spatial deconcentration and the establishment of mixed income housing. In the eyes of the Clinton administration, the presence of middle-class neighbours and their supposedly salubrious values and work ethic would help wean poor black citizens off government support by installing a culture of work and generational responsibility (ibid.: 377). In order to establish these mixed income neighbourhoods, many of the most populous public housing estates were demolished. It is crucial to understand that these policies were to a large extent driven by an association of black and white elites. Holding on to the promises of upward mobility and social integration that had been championed by the Civil Rights Movement, black community leaders and local politicians embraced an aspirational do-it-yourself ethos that saw access to high paying jobs as the key to increasing social respectability and wealth. Often this took the form of social activists forming alliances with politicians, business leaders or real estate developers. In his study of public housing demolition in New Orleans, John Arena details how:

The St. Thomas community and their activist allies forged a partnership with Joe Canizaro, the city's most powerful real estate developer, to privatize the development and create a new 'mixed-income' community that would drastically reduce the number of affordable apartments. From protesting federal and local government initiatives to scale back public housing, tenant

leaders and advisers moved to embrace the Clinton administration's then new HOPE VI federal grant, designed to privatize and downsize public housing (2012: xviii).

Black activists, community leaders and politicians for the most part underwrote the shift away from a state-oriented “command and control approach” (Cisneros and Engdahl, 2009: 11) and embraced the “vitality of the market” (ibid.). This willingness to participate in governmental reform was complimented by an active inclusion of local activists by the political and financial elite. Looking back at the Clinton years, the former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Henry Cisneros has underlined the importance of integrating the non-profit sector and *important interest groups from the 1960s and 1970s* to tackle key housing issues in an un-bureaucratic way (ibid.: 12). This endorsement would be unproblematic if it actually benefitted poor African American communities. Instead, it only benefitted a fraction of that community for a limited amount of time. Citing statistics from the Pew Research Center on Social and Demographic Trends, detailing that between 2005 and 2009 the average black household wealth fell by more than 50%, while white household wealth only fell by 16%, Endnotes argue:

The intergenerational transmission of wealth is less assured for African Americans, whose historical exclusion from real estate markets has meant that middle income earners typically possess much less wealth than white households in the same income range. As a result, those born into middle income families are more likely than whites to make less money than their parents. Downward mobility was amplified by the recent crisis, which negatively affected black wealth much more than white [...] In 1960, 1 in 17 black Americans were in the top quintile of earners; today that number is 1 in 10. Inequality in wealth and income has risen significantly among African

Americans, such that today it is much higher than among whites (2015: 41-42).

The hopes of black community leaders for their constituency to access higher income brackets, as well as homeownership did therefore not come to pass. Instead, the result of the gradual immiseration that followed deindustrialisation and the tendential exclusion of blacks from formal, white-collar labour markets resulted in a drastic increase in black crime. Against liberal theories that see the statistical rise in crime merely as a matter of racist stereotyping or as a pre-emptive strategy to quell an impending race riot (Camp and Heatherton, 2016), we should have the courage to confirm the real increase in violent crime as an *economic phenomenon*. In cities such as St. Louis, Missouri, many neighbourhoods are 95% black and have an unemployment rate of 50% (Endnotes, 2015: 32) It is not surprising that in conditions of such rampant unemployment, people turn to the informal drug economy as a means to generate income. However, since this economy lacks the legal and judicial protections that still characterise the formal market economy, transactions often have to be underwritten by direct force. Carrying a gun is simply part of the job description.

We are thus confronted with the following situation. On the one hand, well-meaning community activists have more chances than ever to have their voices heard and to influence political decision-making. Since the 1980s, a plethora of programmes have been put in place that enable and facilitate the exchange between community organisers and government officials. Members of civil society are thus increasingly included in the administration of formerly exclusively governmental tasks. On the other hand, we'd do well to see these schemes essentially as an outcome of austerity. Since deindustrialisation, the federal state has attempted to cut the costs of social spending wherever it can. This has severely affected various FEMA disaster relief budgets, which, from 2016 to 2017, have been cut by a total



of USD 582 million by the Obama administration.<sup>70</sup> The inclusion of actors from civil society is thus a necessary means for the government to maintain key social services, while saving on federal expenses. It is accompanied by a growing and profound exclusion of a growing surplus population, indexed by increasing unemployment and a rise in crime.

However, since the financial crisis of 2008, there has been a renaissance of *resistant* attempts to organise disaster aid against the state and its budget cuts. In this regard, Occupy Sandy constitutes the most sophisticated and large-scale recent undertaking. However, as the counter-intuitive endorsement of the social movement by FEMA and Homeland Security has shown, even an outspokenly leftist grassroots organisation such as Occupy risk playing into the hands of the government's austerity agenda. In a situation like this and against the good intentions of community organisers, the economy clearly takes precedence over ideology, since the political prestige that Occupy gained by helping citizens in need is trumped by the government's budgetary calculations that rely on civil society efforts such as Occupy to maintain their legitimacy. When entrepreneurial bottom-up organising becomes a mandated state policy for running everything from health care provision to childcare, the resistant energies that can be mobilised by civil society have to be critically rethought. The question then becomes: How to self-organise disaster aid (and other reproductive services) in a way that resists being co-opted by the neoliberal reforms of the state?

## 7.2 Reconsidering Dual Power

The intense co-option of community engagement has led some scholars to consider maintaining self-organised welfare programmes during austerity “a

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<sup>70</sup> See the following statistics on cuts, consolidations and savings from the White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2017/assets/ccs.pdf> (accessed 2.11.2016)

possibility worse than death” (Endnotes, 2013: 89). Against this theoretical pessimism, there has been a resurgent interest in *resistant* forms of self-organisation that takes inspiration from the Black Panthers rather than from Occupy Sandy. This line of thought argues that the Black Panthers’ social programmes constituted a coherent attempt to organise what has been called dual power, an alternative network of social service provision that can rival the state in efficiency and delivery. In his recent reflections on dual power, Fredric Jameson argues that at the extreme end of crisis there is always the possibility of dual power to emerge. In Jameson’s account, dual power develops when a social organisation occupies terrains that are officially prerogatives of the state, such as health care, public transportation or garbage collection, and begins to rival the state in providing these services. Dual power is intimately tied to crisis, since it is during crisis that it becomes markedly clear that the state often fails to provide these basic duties. In Jameson’s words:

I would most notably single out the way organizations like the Black Panthers yesterday or Hamas today function to provide daily services—food kitchens, garbage collection, health care, water inspection, and the like—in areas neglected by some official central government [...] In such situations, power moves to the networks to which people turn for practical help and leadership on a daily basis: in effect, they become an alternate government, without officially challenging the ostensibly legal structure (2016: 4).

Let us revisit the Black Panthers’ social programmes in light of recent theorisations of dual power before evaluating their potential today. Jameson’s engagement with dual power, published alongside a selection of critical commentaries, consciously responds to a current impasse in the progressive political imagination. Jameson’s starting point is that today, both a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and a reform towards a more humane capitalism have dramatically failed: “Social democracy is in our time irretrievably bankrupt, and communism seems dead” (2016: 3). In the face of the exhaustion of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century's rich and variegated political spectrum, the historical anomaly of dual power gains a new relevance for Jameson and his commentators. Dual Power takes its origin in the peculiar situation in Russia between the implosion of tsarism and the October Revolution, when the different factions of soviets, workers' and soldiers' councils all vied for power. The political philosopher Alberto Toscano comments on Lenin's incisive observations of the extraordinary phenomenon of dual power in Russia:

Lenin stresses the unprecedented emergence of a wild anomaly in the panorama of political forms: dual power. As he remarks in *Pravda*, "alongside the Provisional Government, the government of the bourgeoisie, another government has arisen, so far weak and incipient, but undoubtedly a government that actually exists and is growing" (2016: 217-218).

While Jameson indulges in a utopian thought experiment on the potential of locating dual power in the armed forces, Alberto Toscano provides more concrete, actually existing examples of structures of dual power that may autonomously organise social reproduction in the context of disasters. Following on from the young Soviet Union, Toscano lists the establishment of 'self-valorising' "liberated zones" (2016: 224) in 1960s Italy, "the incomplete experiences of dual power in Bolivia and Chile in the early seventies" (*ibid.*: 221), the breakfast and health service programmes of the Black Panther Party, as well as the provision of clean drinking water by the Lebanese Hezbollah as organised attempts that "thrived on the systematic use of the duality power" (*ibid.*: 226). According to Toscano, what these initiatives have in common is their attention to the essential processes of social reproduction, understood as the care and maintenance of the welfare of the population. This biopolitical component gains an increasingly acute dimension today, when the state is gradually but decisively withdrawing from providing these reproductive services:

Within this volatile geometry of forces, the “biopolitical” element provides much of the substance of dual power [...] We could even say that the “biopolitical supplement” to the neoliberal evacuation of services and solidarity is inextricable and primary vis-à-vis any mere military strategy [...] We could call [this] a kind of dual biopower—which is to say the collective attempt to appropriate politically aspects of social reproduction that state and capital have abandoned or rendered unbearably exclusionary, from housing to medicine (ibid.: 228).

Concretely, what provides the trigger as well as the battlefield for dual power are thus the biological cycles of health, nutrition and bodily welfare. For Toscano, this constitutes a decisive shift in the terrain of struggles away from *production* and towards *reproduction*, which he discusses as a shift in the *temporality* of political struggle. Dual power challenges us to think the multiple and incommensurable histories of entangled social and economic forms that might be at odds with the understanding of capitalist development as a linear, progressive process. In another essay, Toscano turns to Étienne Balibar and the latter’s theory of the *lag (décalage)* in order to make sense of the practices of dual power and group their diverse historical expressions at least minimally under a unified conceptual heading. For Toscano, rather than the politics of immediacy, expressed in the revolt, the riot or similar outburst of social negation, at stake in dual power is the delineation of a concept of transition “conceived of as times of unevenness and conflict” (2014: 765), in which an autonomous support structure can effectively arise and take hold. Consequently, dual power works as an alternative third term to our tired “reform-revolution and revolt-revolution dichotomies” (ibid.: 762). Concretely, and referring to Balibar’s concept of the *lag* in *Reading Capital*:

The principal analytic principle in the delineation of transition [...] is the lag (*décalage*) between different components of a social formation (e.g., the lag

between the social relations of appropriation and production, on the one hand, and the legal forms of property, on the other) (ibid.)

For Toscano, following Balibar, the distinction between cycles of *production* and *reproduction* constitutes the primary arena for dual power. While cycles of production, from agriculture to industry and beyond may be historicised in a relatively linear way, drawing on technological innovation or developments in labour organisation, social reproduction, as the types of work that reconstitute labour power and ensure the continuation of the social structure forms the overlooked social substrate that enables these varying productive relations and that moves slower than production. Reproduction is understood by Toscano to cut “across continuity and discontinuity” (ibid.: 766), enabling what he calls a “*décalage* or ‘non-correspondence’ between different levels or components of the social formation” (ibid. : 768). This non-correspondence gives social reproduction its semi-autonomy. It is this *lag* that dual power organisations exploit in their attempts to manage social reproduction themselves.

While different commentators have critiqued Jameson’s abandonment of the party form (Dean, 2016) and his neglect of questions of hierarchy and gender within dual power structures (Weeks, 2016), thinkers of dual power in the wake of Jameson agree that dual power provides “ways of rooting the need to undo capitalist relations in the real, if partial, experience of attempts to limit its powers” (Toscano, 2016: 229). In other words, and applied to our context, dual power is seen as a promising format to provide self-organised welfare services that limit vulnerability because they are autonomous from both the state’s and capital’s embeddedness in structural violence. In the absence of well- functioning state and market mechanisms that provide for the people in times of crisis, dual power is heralded as a unifying force in the hands of the citizens that can lastingly diminish disaster vulnerability.

### 7.3 Reproduction and Separation

It is this idea of unification that I take issue with. The foregoing case studies have shown how the idea of dual power was fundamentally transformed during the 1980s and 1990s. After the influence that dual power exerted in the hands of the Black Panther Party was smashed by the US state, its methods of self-organisation and bottom-up service provision were adopted by a new austerity regime of social welfare provision that relies on the engagement of communities to supplement dwindling state services with altruistic citizen engagement. However, in addition to these *historical* reasons for the defeat of dual power, I argue that there is something *structural* in the nature of *reproductive labour itself* that divides rather than unites. I have maintained throughout that disaster relief is best understood as a form of reproductive labour akin to care work, housework or medical care. I have further argued that the particularity of reproductive labour lies in it being unproductive of value (Scholz, 2000). Rather than being directly market mediated (DMM), it takes place in a separate sphere that is only tangentially or indirectly market mediated (IMM) (Endnotes, 2013). Formerly managed by the civil servants of the state, it is now again increasingly in the hands of unpaid volunteers.

Against the hopes for post-industrial labour solidarity, expressed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) and other post-operaists, I argue that the deindustrialisation of the 1960s has only further separated ordinary people from each other. Coextensive with declining jobs in heavy industry, Western deindustrialisation was accompanied by a large increase in service work, including everything from waitressing and teaching to bookkeeping. Additionally, because of demographic changes and an ageing population, there has been a drastic rise in care work, such as nursing and elder care, to the point that today, more and more people are formally or informally employed in various types of reproductive labour. The particularity of reproductive labour as compared to industrial work is that it undermines the possibility for communitarian organisation that would be required

for dual power. Why is this the case? To answer this question, we have to look at the historical evolution of industrial work and care work that gave them their technical specificity as distinct forms of labour under capitalism.

Marxist labour history differentiates between formal subsumption and real subsumption. Formal subsumption is the process in economic development when capitalism appropriates an already existing mode of production, including its techniques, forms of labour and distribution networks (Dipanker, 1980). Real subsumption builds on formal subsumption and constitutes the period in which capitalism produces an autochthonous mode of production, complete with its own forms of labour, technologies and world market (Hardt, 2016). Capitalist economic development historically tends towards real subsumption. Its paradigm is the process of industrial mechanisation, in which manual labour jobs are automated and taken over by machines to maximise labour productivity and save on wages. The never-quite-achieved fantasy of real subsumption is capitalism's complete independence from labour. We can already see how disaster relief and other kinds of reproductive labour present an exception to this schema. The particularity of disaster relief is that it can only be *minimally automated*. In the last instance, it still relies on manpower and human presence to function. This was the case two hundred years ago and is still the case today.

Endnotes have diagnosed this resistance to real subsumption as the defining feature of much reproductive labour:

Most of all, what was resistant to real subsumption was not industry at all – but rather services [...] Services are precisely those economic activities that get left behind. They consist of all those activities that prove resistant to being transformed into goods (that is self-service implements) (2015: 156).

The important thing to grasp about this impossibility of reproductive labour automation is that the experiences of people working in the service sector will often be incommensurable with each other. While industrialisation created a fundamental levelling of workers in the experience of deskilling (Braverman, 1975), in the reproductive sector, jobs mostly retain their unique particularity or skill-set. Thus, while workers in automobile factories, power plants or mines could all relate to the shared experience of being incorporated into a machine-driven factory environment (and could organise based on this experience), a nurse, teacher or aid worker do not share the same experience of their workplace. Even if they are all structurally involved in providing a reproductive service to an end consumer, their experiences are qualitatively unique. For Endnotes this constitutes a crucial limit to the possibility of labour solidarity in the reproductive sector:

Real subsumption is what makes workers' jobs alike, across industries. It is the process of mechanisation that reduces all workers to semi-skilled factory hands. Without mechanisation, labour processes retain their specificity, in terms of the skills required (making coffee versus programming versus teaching versus caring). Service jobs are less homogeneous [...] Here is the difference between the experience of industrial workers, becoming a compact mass, and the experience of service workers, confronting an endless differentiation of tasks (2015: 156-157).

The tragedy of care work therefore is that it does not unite. In the disaster sector, we are faced with the increasing atomisation of different groups and individuals with vastly different objectives; skilled and salaried civil servants working for a state, NGO foot soldiers in search of the next big donor, informally organised first responders, or local residents, dispersed online activists and *digital humanitarians*. None of these actors share the same mission, interest or motivation. On the ground, they confront each other as competitors for limited resources. While cooperation and association do happen in every disaster situation, in this



context, it is difficult to envision the kind of solidarity that could give rise to a unified structure of dual power.

If they are not united through a shared experience of labour, how do actually existing dual power structures maintain group cohesion? When looking at the historical examples provided by theorists of dual power, it seems clear that self-organised social welfare services are mostly allocated along race, religion and class lines. The initiatives of the Black Panthers would have been unthinkable without their grounding in a specific African-American experience.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, it is clear that Dawah, the social service wing of the Palestinian Hamas (summoned by Jameson to exemplify dual power) draws heavily on a particular Sunni-Islamic identity. Hezbollah, one of Toscano's examples of dual power, is strongly identified with their Shi'a constituency. Seen in this light, the notion of dual power is further complicated. If any of these groups successfully build dual power, do their actions really have a universal horizon that goes beyond an identitarian attachment to race, religion, or nation? Similarly, what does it mean that the "Suburban Warriors" (McGirr, 2015) of the New Right in Europe and North America seem to provide the best grassroots organisation for today? Does this count as dual power? If yes, can its effects be envisioned as democratic or emancipatory?

In the absence of this unifying horizon and confronted with quickly escalating welfare divisions along race, class religious and class lines, we should see disaster aid soberly as what it is: A social service that the state has become reluctant to do. While social democratic states still maintained an at least *de jure* (if not *de facto*) equal access to disaster relief, this formal equality disappeared when this reproductive labour was cast off and placed into the hands of ordinary citizens. In the post-war era, it was economically viable for Western states to invest into the welfare of

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<sup>71</sup> My discussion of the Black Panthers' complex engagement with race in chapter III testifies to this identitarian limit to dual power. The Panthers were able to garner much of their political support precisely by campaigning around issues of racial subjugation. While this attachment was later nuanced and negotiated in the disagreement between Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, blackness was always at the core of Black Panther organising.

workers to ensure their labour supply and stimulate consumption. However, the saturation of labour markets in the 1970s made welfare services dispensable as a mere strain on state budgets. The theorists Maya Gonzales and Jeanne Neton describe this policy, in which formerly state-run services are discarded and hoisted onto the people as a process of *abjection*:

Indeed, the category of the abject refers specifically to activities that became waged at some point but are in the process of returning into the unwaged IMM sphere because they've become too costly for the state or capital [...] These will become DMM for those who can afford it (privatization) or lapse into the sphere of unwaged indirect market mediation (2014: 170-171).

Rather than glorifying the creative powers of civil society to provide welfare services in an emergent and *ad hoc* way, we should admit that the shift in responsibility from the state to the people is too structural a phenomenon to be managed in a self-organised way. While, as Gonzales and Neton argue. “we might, in the crisis, have no choice but to self-organise these reproductive activities [...] We must treat it as it is: a self-organization of the abject, of what no one else is willing to do” (ibid.). Against the expectations of theorists of dual power, we should admit that despite the presence of dual power structures, active in welfare provision from health care to disaster relief, this form of self-organisation does not unite. It works through separation. Rather than “a rigorously immanent logic of transitional thinking” (Weeks, 2016: 247), dual power does not transition to anything, let alone a post-capitalist future. It merely allocates limited resources along its own lines of privilege when the state refuses to do so.

To be sure, further research is needed to evaluate the political horizon of individual self-organised relief initiatives on their own terms. Furthermore, while the foregoing case studies have critiqued the emancipatory potential associated with grassroots disaster relief, it should be clear that the capitalist way of running relief is

similarly doomed to fail. This is proven time and again in countless disasters as well as by much high-profile scholarship on so-called disaster capitalism and the failures of states and corporations to address its effects (Klein, 2007, Klein, 2014, Loewenstein, 2017). What is worth much further investigation however are our tried and tested solution attempts, political fads, and shibboleths of how relief should be organised instead. My case studies have discussed the most important theoretical and practical propositions of dual power, state-centred, and civil-society-centred approaches to disaster. I have read these against their historical conditions of emergence, as well as evaluated them in our current political context of protracted crisis. Fundamentally, my analysis has questioned our misplaced optimism in holding on to outdated and impossible political forms and argued for the critical suspension of our theoretical redemption fantasies.

At its most minimal, my thesis has argued for the necessity of confronting disaster studies with political economy to make sense of our current catastrophic conjuncture. Consequently, I have argued that if we hold on to the conceptual apparatus of disaster at all, this should be done in the guise of crisis. While critical crisis theory speaks in the grammar of long cycles (Arrighi, 1994) or downturns and upswings (McNally, 2009), it is not clear that such a pattern of ebb and flow is visible today. Instead, I have argued that we seem to see a more absolute tendency confirmed; that of the permanent exclusion of a growing number of people from the elementary forms of social participation through employment. While governments worldwide have sought new activities to absorb this surplus – such as mobilising it to volunteer in welfare provision– we should resist these forms of occupational therapy. While there are no readymade solutions that can be inherited from the past, it is clear that the eviction of people from the very process of social reproduction is today slowly approaching its absolute limit.

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